

MEN IN BLACK: INTERNATIONAL

THOR AND VALKYRIE SUITED AND BOOTED



314



X-MEN DARK PHOENIX

Exclusive access
to the last stand
for Marvel's
mutants

THE
MANDALORIAN
LEADS OUR...

MASSIVE STAR WARS PREVIEW

All the latest news
from a galaxy far,
far away....

PLUS JESSICA JONES • BLACK MIRROR • BRIGHTBURN
THE HANDMAID'S TALE • KRYPTON • GAME OF THRONES!



THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

All the info you need
on the Star Wars Saga's
epic conclusion



EMPEROR PALPATINE

How is he back?



THE CLONE WARS

Sneak peek at the final season

PLUS
PETER MAYHEW
REMEMBERED



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34

SFX Contents

ISSUE
314JULY
2019

34

STAR WARS

Open the blast doors! Everything you need to know about the future of that galaxy far, far away on big screen and small. Plus: cackle along with our Palpatine theories!

42

X-MEN: DARK PHOENIX

The classic comic book storyline comes to the screen – again. We unleash the Phoenix force as the mutants clash in 1992.

46

NOS4A2

Joe Hill's soul-snacking horror tale gets the TV treatment.

50

KRYPTON

Kneel before Zod! We said kneel! The Super-prequel show returns for more planet-troubling thrills.

54

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

The third season of the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's tale is here.

56

MEN IN BLACK: INTERNATIONAL

We'd love to tell you what's in this feature but we've been neuralyzed.

66

BLACK MIRROR

Just when you thought it was safe to relax around technology again, Charlie Brooker's back...

70

JESSICA JONES

SFX heads to New York for an on-set exclusive as Marvel's hardass PI returns for one final Netflix case. Sob!

76

MARIA LEWIS

The brilliant urban fantasy novelist shares the secrets of her latest book, *The Witch Who Courted Death*.

78

GAME OF THRONES

The cast look back at eight years of death and intrigue. We're amazed they're not just a big pile of twitching, bloodied limbs by now.



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Check out page 24 for more details

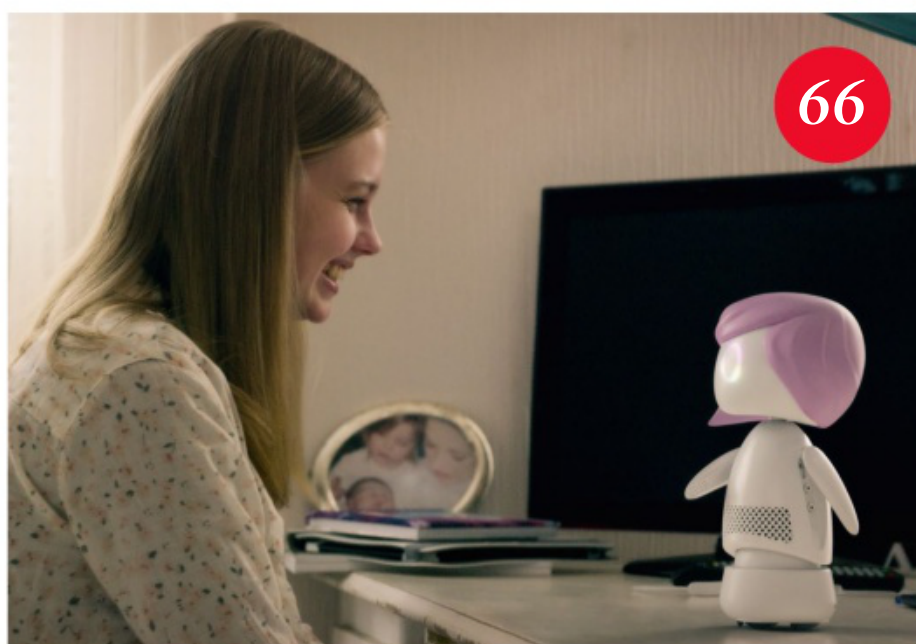
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46



56



66

RED ALERT

9 IN FABRIC

Director Peter Strickland gives us the measurements for his new movie about a haunted dress.

12 CHILD'S PLAY

The diabolical doll is back, now voiced by Mark Hamill!

18 FEAR THE WALKING DEAD

Get set for more crossovers with *The Walking Dead* in season five.

21 SUPERMAN: YEAR ONE

The Man of Steel's origin story, retold by Frank Miller.

REVIEWS

84 AVENGERS: ENDGAME

11 years. 22 films. 18,324 Tony Stark smirks. Can Marvel nail the landing? Of course they can.

86 THE CURSE OF LA LLORANA

Beware the Weeping Woman in this '70s-set horror.

92 GLASS

The kids... they call this *Glass*. But then so does everyone else.

94 THE LEGO MOVIE 2

Taking the sequel apart, brick by brick. Watch where you step on the carpet, won't you?

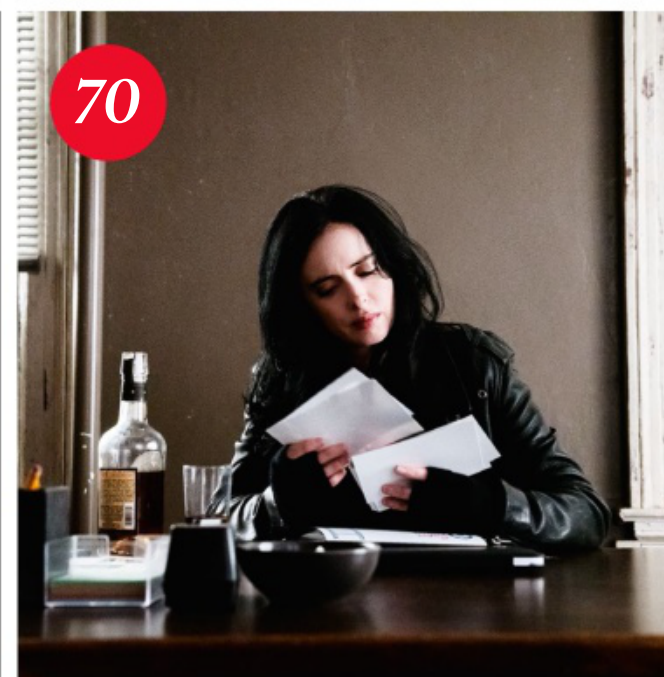
100 FRANKISSSTEIN

Jeanette Winterson's latest reanimates Mary Shelley's classic.

108 WAR OF THE REALMS

By Odin's beard! Malekith and the Dark Elves threaten the Marvel Universe in this epic crossover.

70



REGULARS

26 POST APOCALYPSE

Mixed reactions to the *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker* trailer and more! Cue malevolent laugh again.

28 FREESPEAK

Author Tom Lloyd on why fantasy books don't need maps. What fresh heresy is this?

30 BOOK CLUB

Rena Rosser celebrates *Illusion*, Paula Volsky's alt universe take on the French Revolution.

113 BLASTERMIND

How well do you know the works of dream king Neil Gaiman?

114 TOTAL RECALL

Ian ruffles the fur of *Digby*, *The Biggest Dog In The World*. Just don't think of the poop scoop.

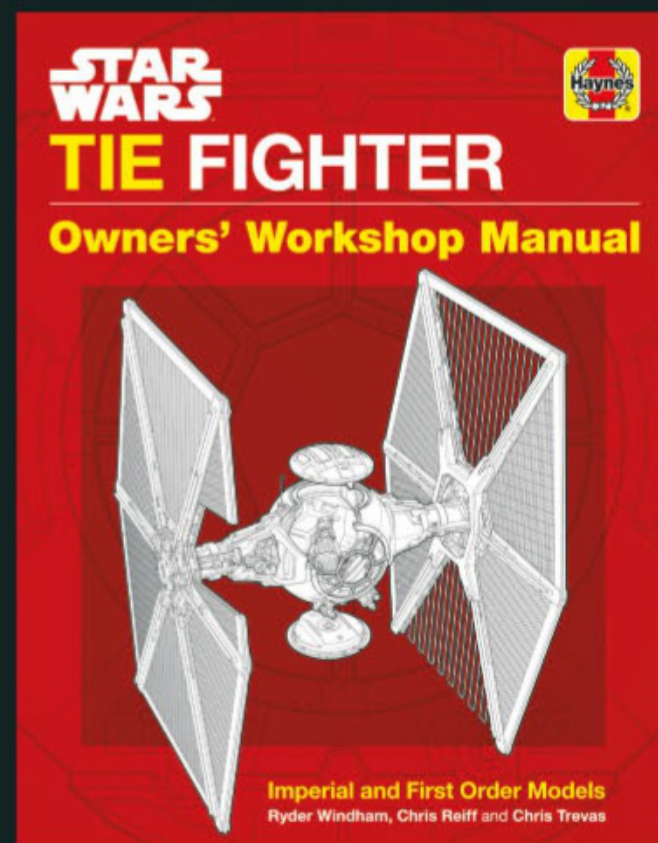




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"Hm. Perhaps a faint hint of salmonella..."

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The Ed Zone



By all rights 2019 should have been the year of *Star Wars*. After all, not only are we getting Episode IX, the final film in the Skywalker Saga, there's the first live-action *Star Wars* series, *The Mandalorian*, and a final season of Dave Filoni's animated series *The Clone Wars* to look forward to.

But after *Solo* came and went, my *Star Wars* loyalty wavered. Instead, all my excitement was reserved for two other cultural titans: *Avengers: End-Game* and *Thrones*. But after attending *Star Wars Celebration* in Chicago and seeing what Lucasfilm has cooking (p34), *Star Wars* has returned to its rightful place at the pinnacle of my affections.

It's also been a bittersweet month for *Star Wars* fans as we learnt that Peter Mayhew has died at the age of 74. Peter's performance as the lovable, and supremely huggable, Wookiee shone through that magnificent yak-hair suit. Our full tribute can be found on p40.

Elsewhere, we spoke to *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* director Simon Kinberg about righting the wrongs of *The Last Stand* (p42), visited the set of *Jessica Jones* for its farewell season (p70), and went all-out on *Men In Black* past and present (p56).

And if you're wondering who I am, best not to get hung up on it, as next issue my mug will regenerate into the next permanent SFX Editor. Who will it be? Why not subscribe and find out! Details on p24.

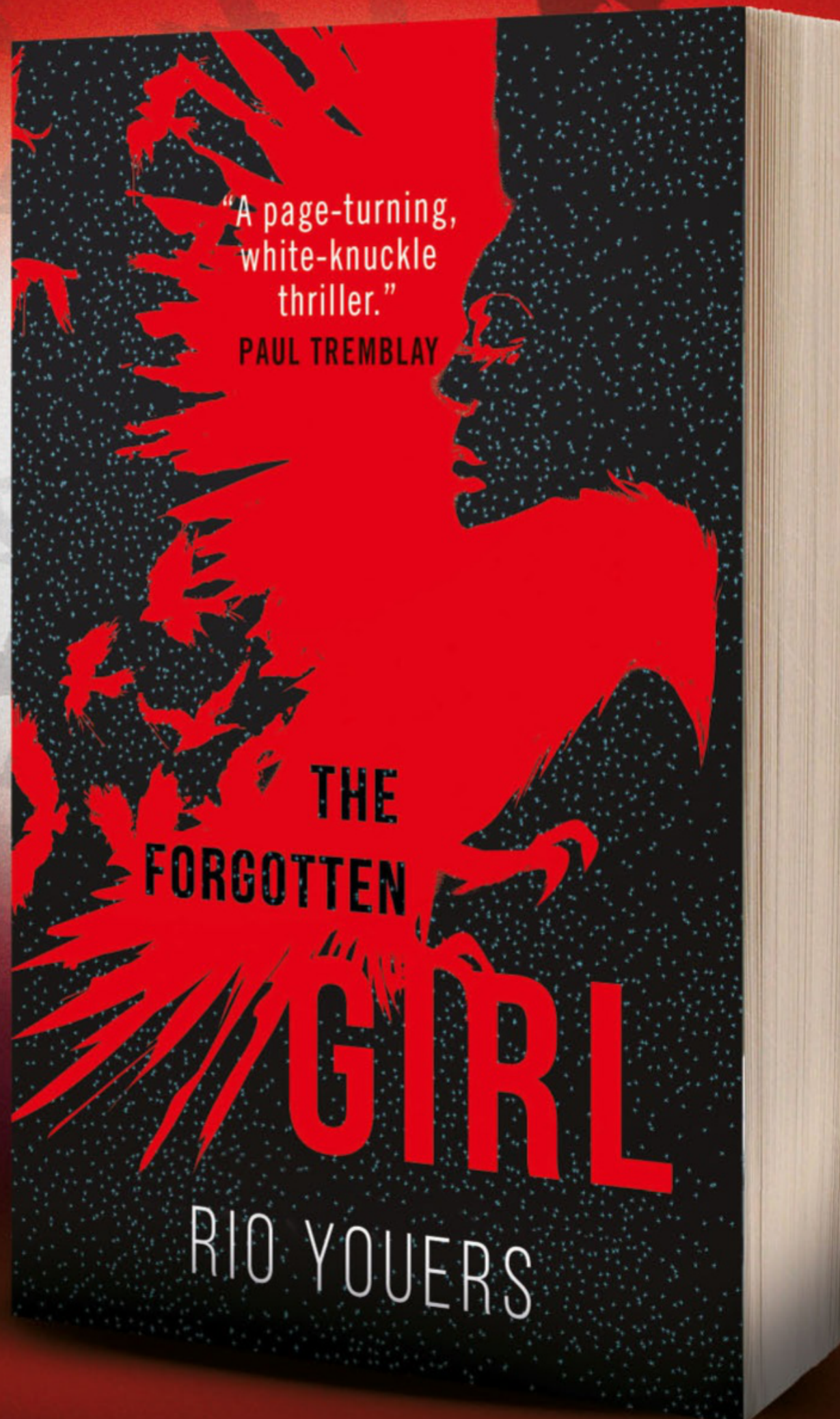


Jordan

Jordan Farley,
 Acting Editor
 @JordanFarley

**"AN ABSOLUTE ROCKET...
IT'S A WORK THAT MARKS OUT RIO YOUNG AS A BIG STAR."**

JOE HILL

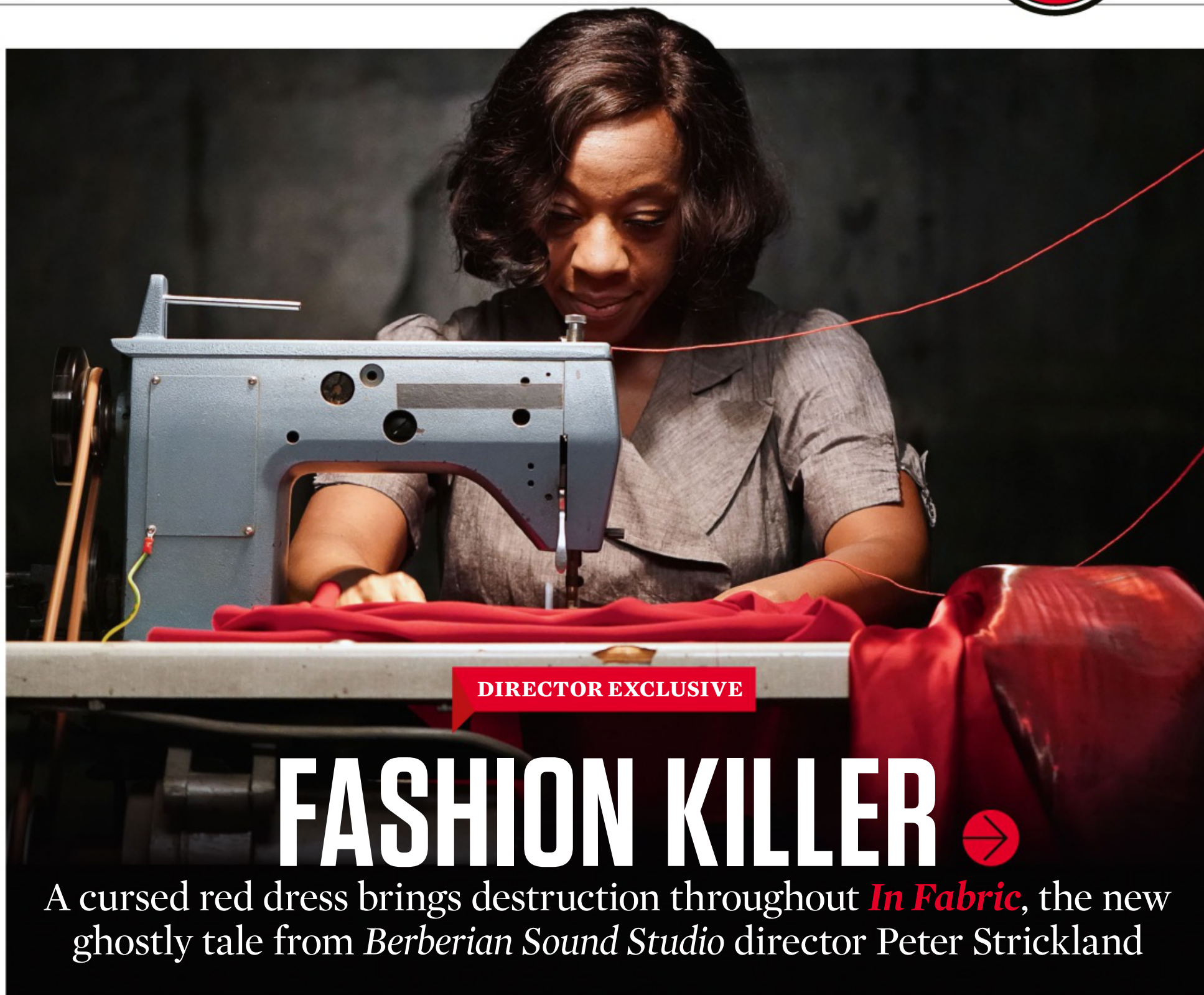


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Red Alert

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// CHUCKY! → edited by Jordan Farley

JULY
2019



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

FASHION KILLER ➔

A cursed red dress brings destruction throughout *In Fabric*, the new ghostly tale from *Berberian Sound Studio* director Peter Strickland

Highlights



14 TOYS WILL BE TOYS

→ Woody and Buzz return in *Toy Story 4*. Here's five things you didn't know...



21 MEN OF STEEL

→ John Romita Jr. and Frank Miller's *Superman: Year One* origins tale.



22 SPECIAL AGENTS

→ Get the lowdown on the new series of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

SCI-FACT! *In Fabric* is produced by Rook Films, the company behind the celebrated Ben Wheatley's work.



To look at the films of Peter Strickland is like being transported into a rarefied universe, somehow both familiar and otherworldly. "I guess that's what I look for personally when I watch a film – I want to lose myself in something," he says over coffee at London's Hospital Club. "I don't want to see real life. I don't want to see social realism. I get enough of that reading the paper!"

From his 2009 debut, the rape-revenge drama *Katalin Varga* to *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) and *The Duke Of Burgundy* (2014) – films immersed respectively in Italian giallo and 1970s soft-core erotica – Strickland has brought a stylish and cine-literate touch to everything he's done. And so it goes for his new film, *In Fabric*, a supernatural-tinged tale of what can only be described as a killer red dress.

It begins as middle-aged divorcee Sheila (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) buys a crimson gown for a date from an old-fashioned department store, Dentley & Soper's, run by the linguistically florid Miss Luckwood (Fatma Mohamed). It just so happens the garment's cursed, wreaking havoc upon those who wear it. For Strickland, it's a far cry from most contemporary horror.

"What's terrifying about death is that it's random," he says. "My problem with some horror films is that there's a tacit understanding that the victim deserves to die, perhaps because they're fornicating behind the bike sheds, and I never saw what the problem with that was anyway! I don't think anyone deserves to die. If you make a death moralistic in some way, then you lose that irrational power."

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

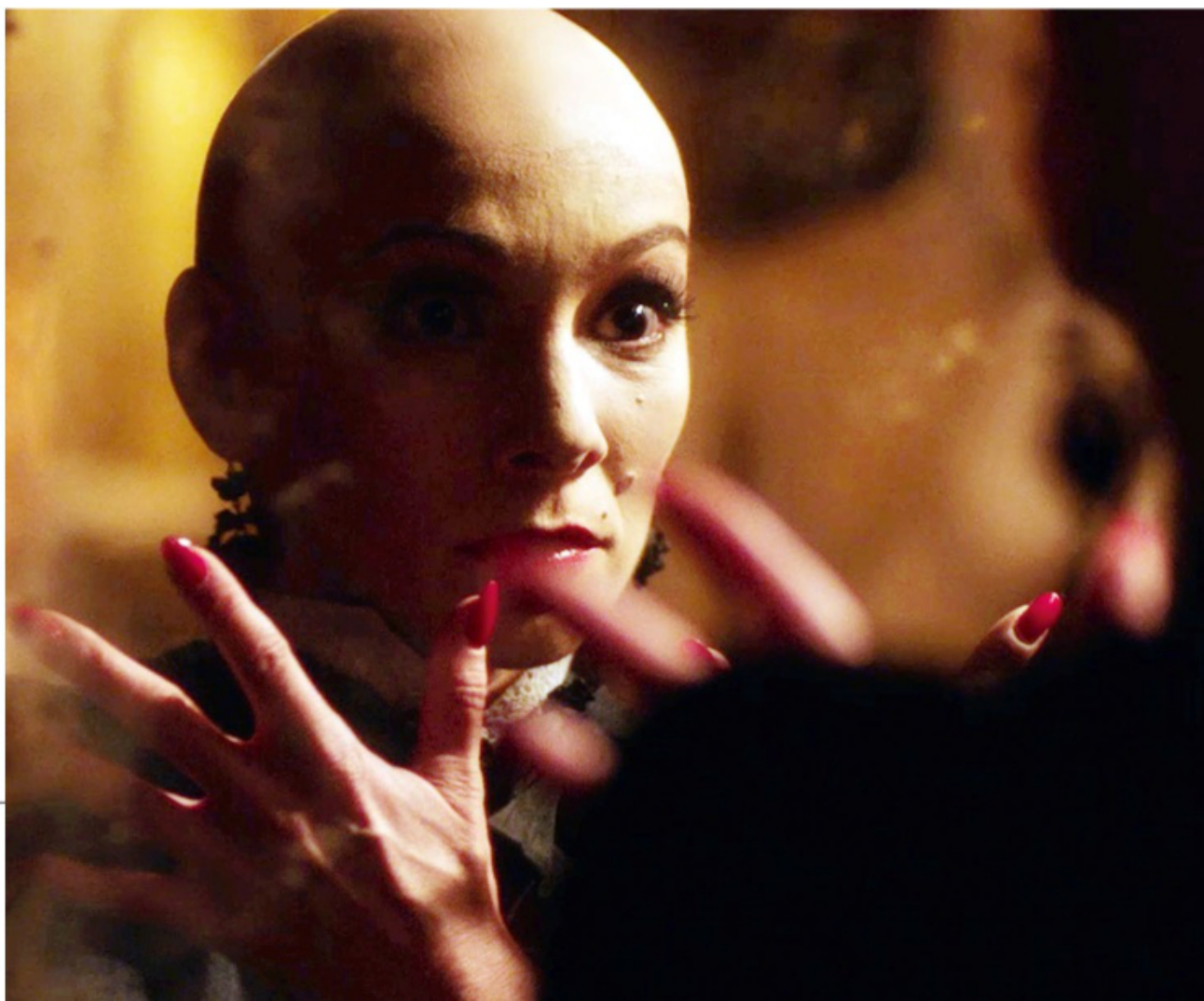
When it came to casting, it was *Berberian* star Toby Jones that suggested Jean-Baptiste, who famously starred in Mike Leigh's 1996 adoption saga *Secrets & Lies*. Despite his lack of interest in social realism, Strickland went out and bought a copy on DVD. "Thank God [it's 20 years old], it was cheaper to buy!" he laughs. "I just fast-forwarded to the bits with Marianne... I thought she was wonderful. I still haven't seen the whole film in one go."

With the striking production design and evocative musical score by Cavern Of Anti-Matter, *In Fabric* appears to be another nod to the grisly Italian giallo genre made popular by directors like Mario Bava and Dario Argento. "I did a press junket the other week and every question was about Italian horror," he sighs. "I'm not bothered by it – I love those films – but it just wasn't on my mind. What was on my mind was mostly just department stores."

Come again? "My attraction to department stores is the same as my attraction to those films," he continues, entirely seriously. "They're very flamboyant, very heightened – the artifice, the colours, the production design – so there are similarities between



"Does my bum look, erm, cursed in this?"





She'd only asked the hairdresser for a quick trim.

“Death’s random. If you make a death moralistic, then you lose that irrational power”

department stores and giallo. I think that’s why the connection is being made.” This may be the very first – and last – time that these two disparate elements ever get compared.

Strickland, who grew up in Reading, goes all nostalgic when he recalls Jacksons, the Berkshire town’s flagship department store. “It closed down five years ago. We wanted to shoot there because the building was intact inside. They shot an episode of *Endeavour* there. I’m still jealous of that episode! It was wonderful, Jackson’s, really wonderful, but we missed the boat. It was completely gutted out.”

The production instead shot in Alders in Croydon, another defunct department store, while Strickland turned to other influences to make *In Fabric*. From Ricky Gervais’s *The Office* to the mannequin sculptures of Edward Kienholz, Herk Harvey’s 1962 horror *Carnival Of Souls*, the “homosexual leg-lock” in the lawn-fight in *Lethal Weapon* and, most bizarrely, ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos on YouTube.

“It’s just these videos of people whispering or turning the pages of catalogues,” he says. (It’s used partly to aid sleeping, but fits right in with Strickland’s very tactile atmosphere.) “I guess this film was designed to fall asleep to – it’s an extended ASMR YouTube video,” he laughs. “You get what you’re walking into. If you fall asleep, you’re not going to lose yourself.”

For all Strickland’s protestations that *In Fabric* is not strictly horror, it has the capacity to seriously creep you out. Like the scene with Sheila’s “possessed” washing machine, possibly the scariest domestic appliance since the TV in *Poltergeist*. “If we had more money, more time, we’d have re-set another washing machine,” he sighs. “But we literally had one take and we had to work with it, so it was frustrating!”

Working on a budget lower than most Hollywood horrors, Strickland has nevertheless crafted something mysterious and multi-layered. “There’s no single meaning or single message,” he says. “I guess a lot of the cinema I love is experiential and sensory. For me, it’s all about writing characters that I love and putting them in a world which is very atmospheric and textured, and seeing what happens.” **JM**

In Fabric opens in cinemas on 28 June.

DRESSED TO KILL

Marianne Jean-Baptiste on horror and lonely hearts...



Had you followed Peter Strickland’s work before you came onboard *In Fabric*?

→ No. I was sent the script and my agent was like, “Here’s the script. Don’t read it yet. We’re going to send you some of the stuff that he’s done, to put it in context.” But I ignored him and just read the script! I thought it was really interesting. I didn’t foresee what you see on screen now but you got a sense of the world that he was going to paint when you read it. So I read it and then he sent me *Berberian Sound Studio* and *Duke Of Burgundy* and I said, “Okay, this is an adventure I’d like to go on.”

Do you see it as a horror movie? The moment with the washing machine is really unsettling...

→ It is unsettling. What’s interesting is that it’s a washing machine and it’s very domestic. Even though it becomes a demonic washing machine! Maybe I just feel that way because you’re so invested in those moments as being real... which is why I refuse to see it as horror. But it actually may well be. Personally, I grew up on *Armchair Thriller*, *Tales Of The Unexpected* and *Hammer House Of Horror*. I called them “chillers”; they were creepy and atmospheric and something wicked was going on...

It also feels very nostalgic. The way Sheila scans the *Lonely Hearts* column, for example...

→ Oh certainly, very nostalgic. I think with Sheila, it was very important for Peter to have the whole *Lonely Hearts* thing. This is pre-Match.com. Looking through the papers. That whole thing of writing letters, posting letters, waiting for a response. It’s not that thing where you can pick up your phone and go, “He likes me!” You’d have to literally wait!

What was it like shooting scenes in a derelict department store in Croydon?

→ Oh, it was awful! That one floor we took over... it was filthy, it was scary. Myself, the costume designer, the make-up artist and the dressers... somebody would want to go to the toilet and it’d be, “Do you want to go? Yeah, let’s all go...” We wouldn’t go on our own! It was so creepy!

GETTY (3)

SCI-FACT! A *Child's Play* television series is also in the works from the original film's writer Don Mancini.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Killer doll Chucky is getting an upgrade in the *Child's Play* reboot

Released in 1988, *Child's Play* beat *Toy Story* to the punch. But instead of sentient toys who keep their true nature secret from humanity, Chucky is a murderous doll possessed by the spirit of a serial killer. After six (increasingly outlandish) sequels, the series has finally gone down the reboot route and given Chucky a 21st century makeover.

This time it's Aubrey Plaza's Karen Barclay who gives her 13-year-old son Andrew (Gabriel Bateman) a Buddi doll named Chucky for his birthday. However, this contemporary Chucky isn't brought to life by voodoo magic. Instead, he's a hi-tech AI toy with a glitch in his programming, allowing him to control technology and wreak bloody havoc.

"I learned early on that there wasn't any voodoo involved, that it was an AI concept," director Lars Klevberg tells *Red Alert*. "It was interesting how we could tie that into Chucky's arc and his transition throughout the movie."

Like all good evil AIs, Chucky will adapt and evolve over the course of the film by taking in the world around him. "Chucky learns from us," Klevberg explains. "He learns everything from the TV, the radio, and he imprints every visual image. Chucky's learning curve is grounded in how he looks at his surroundings."

PUPPET MASTER

Chucky will be putting this knowledge to good use. "He's capable of connecting to different products from the Kaslan Corporation, which allows us to be more creative in how he puts people down," Klevberg adds. "We really wanted to stick within the horror and gore in this one. We're not holding back."

Brad Dourif has voiced Chucky since '88, but the reboot required a fresh voice, albeit one the world is intimately familiar with – Mark Hamill, a casting coup that surprised Klevberg.

He didn't appreciate being forced to wear dungarees.



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“Mark was the first one we wanted,” Klevberg recalls. “We wanted someone who was able to craft a character that you can connect to. I also knew his work as a voice actor, especially his take on the Joker. When we reached out to him, we didn’t expect it to lead to anything. But he jumped on it immediately.”

A phone call with Luke Skywalker followed. “He loved the story,” Klevberg chuckles. “Mark was super-excited to be a part of it. He watched all the *Child’s Play* movies back-to-back when he agreed to take on the part. He was super-professional and really into it.”

Ever since *Child’s Play* (2019) was announced, fans of the franchise have proven unreceptive to a reinvention of their horror icon (who can blame them, look how Freddy, Jason, Leatherface et al turned out). Klevberg admits it’s been an uphill struggle, but is confident that this version of Chucky will appeal to a new generation of moviegoers while satisfying the naysayers.

“We expected there to be a little backlash,” Klevberg admits. “Don Mancini is doing his television show through Universal. Personally, I can’t think too much about it. My focus is on the movie. We wanted to pay homage to the original. I think a lot of the old fanbase is coming on board with our vision, which is really cool.”

“It will be fun for older audiences to see you can still craft a great story with Chucky as a character, but in a modern time,” Klevberg adds. “That is really unique. I’m looking forward to showing that.” **BC**

Child’s Play is released on 21 June.

AERIAL ASSAULT SCI-FI TV ROUND UP

- Hulu bringing Marvel icons Ghost Rider and **Daimon Helstrom** to TV. *Agents Of SHIELD*’s Gabriel Luna plays Ghost Rider again – but the show will have a brand new continuity.
- Jordan Peele’s rebooted **Twilight Zone** gets a second season.
- Paging Warwick Davis! Disney+ planning a series spinning off from George Lucas and Ron Howard’s 1988 fantasy **Willow**.
- 2013 zombie rom-com **Warm Bodies** also getting a TV incarnation.
- Vincent Cassell on villain duties in **Westworld** season three.
- *Into The Spider-Verse*’s Phil Lord and Chris Miller to develop a Spidey-flavoured TV universe for Sony.
- Netflix cancelling **Santa Clarita Diet** after three seasons.
- Nickelodeon developing new, teen-centric **Star Trek** animated series.
- Laura Donnelly to star in Joss Whedon’s Victorian fantasy **The Nevers**.
- Fox chopping *X-Men* spin-off **The Gifted** after two seasons.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE!

UNHOLY REDEEMER

Following in Buffy’s footsteps, **Angel** is returning to comics in a new series from BOOM! Studios



➔ **After rebooting Buffy, BOOM! Studios** is resurrecting Angel in a new monthly series by writer Bryan Edward Hill and artist Gleb Melnikov. But while she has reverted to her high-school days, her soulmate is still around the age David Boreanaz was when he portrayed him in 1997.

“That means I have to take my time before diving head-first into a love story,” says Hill. “Because while Buffy has to mature, in many ways, Angel does as well.”

Hill will alternate between his contemporary adventures and historical exploits. “One of the first words I said to BOOM! was ‘*Highlander*,’” he laughs. “I loved how those characters could have a riveting story in the present, but we would see an equally interesting story of their past, and how the past and present define one another. Time runs in cycles, little changes in the result of them based on our choices. Angel’s punishment is eternity, so how can he not repeat the mistakes of his past?”

Can Angel truly atone for his previous misdeeds? “I believe in redemption, but I also know it’s not easy,” he admits. “Some people can’t do what it requires, and the question of this series is ‘can Angel actually find it?’” **SJ**

Angel #1 is out May 29



GETTY (3)

“DON’T QUOTE ME”

“SHOUT-OUT TO ARYA STARK FOR PUTTING IN THAT WORK LAST WEEK.”

Canadian rapper Drake used his Billboard Music Award acceptance speech to talk about the truly important things in life.



SCI-FACT! The Second Chance antique shop in *Toy Story 4* was established in 1986 and has the street number 1200 – just like Pixar.

5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT...

TOY STORY 4

Woody and Buzz are back – along with a talking spork having an existential crisis

TS3 WASN'T MEANT TO BE THE END

1 With Andy going to college and the toys finding a new home with Bonnie, *Toy Story 3*'s ending felt like the perfect finale. But Pixar didn't see it that way. "[Writer] Andrew Stanton was adamant that it was never intended to be the end," producer Jonas Rivera tells *Red Alert*. "It's just the ending of a movie. What really unlocked it [for us] was the truthful observation that it's the ending of Andy's story, but Andy, as important as he is, was always the external story. The real internal story is Woody."

WOODY'S NO LONGER TOP DOG

2 While affable cowboy Woody was always de facto leader among Andy's toys, things are different in Bonnie's room,

where Dolly rules the roost. "We liked the idea that it's a merger and it's a little bumpy," explains Rivera. "I think being just another toy is a big thing for Woody to deal with. He knows deep down it's not okay that he's been benched. We really are challenging him – we've never really seen him have that problem before."

A NEW TOY IS RUBBISH. LITERALLY

3 *Toy Story 4* bends the rules of the series by giving life to repurposed rubbish, after Bonnie puts a face and pipecleaner arms on a spork. Unfortunately, Forky (voiced by *Arrested Development*/*Veep*'s Tony Hale) can't quite get to grips with his new toy status. "We thought, 'Can we do that? What are the rules?'" Rivera admits. "Having him in the movie felt

like a way to amplify the 'toy truth' of this world. He actually puts them in danger because he could just walk across the street [in front of people] – that felt like extra fun pressure to add and he became more than a gag."

BO PEEP IS BACK!

4 Woody's love interest was an AWOL lost toy in *Toy Story 3*, but when he runs into her in part four, he finds she's embracing being an independent toy. "In *Toy Story 3* she was a bit of a casualty and a reminder that time does march on," Rivera says. "Obviously losing her would have been something that haunted Woody. But when we started to crack this story it was like this was an opportunity to use it to our advantage and to really show what happens to someone [after they've left]."

THIS IS IMPROVISED ANIMATION

5 New characters Bunny and Ducky, a pair of sewn-together fairground prizes, are voiced by *Us* director Jordan Peele and comedy partner Keegan-Michael Key. The writers gave them a rough idea about their scenes and let them do the rest. "I've never seen someone be as skilled at improv," Rivera says. "In animation it's really hard to make it sound and feel as if it's just coming off the tip of your tongue, but here it literally just free-flows from them." **RE**

Toy Story 4 is in cinemas from 21 June.



SCI-FACT! To prepare for *Annabelle Comes Home*, Mckenna Grace kept a journal as Judy Warren.

NEW AUTHOR

JON STEINHAGEN

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT AND COMPOSER/ LYRICIST BEHIND THE HANGING ARTIST



What's the pitch?

→ Franz Kafka died of starvation secondary to laryngeal tuberculosis on 3 June 1924 in a sanitarium. Here, he awakens cured, attended by a giant insect named Gregor. Then he's recruited to assist in investigating a string of deaths: the victims show signs of having been hanged, but a rope is never found. The main suspect is a man whose "act" is to hang himself, but he can't be connected to the crimes.

Did you have to do much research?

→ I own a book called *The City Of K: Franz Kafka And Prague*. The surprising things came in the tiny details: Kafka's vegetarianism, and his intense religious research. I made use of the latter.

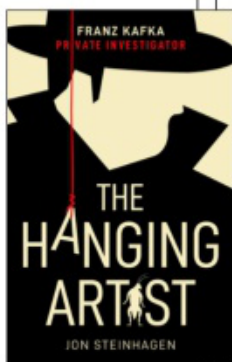
How long did it take to write?

→ Two months, working every day. The idea came in February 2017. Three months later, I devised an outline and submitted it with the first three chapters. Six months later, Abaddon offered me a contract.

Any plans for more Kafka?

→ I'm about to pitch *The Agony Contraption*, inspired by Kafka's *In The Penal Colony*, so with luck, Kafka and Gregor will be back!

The Hanging Artist is released by Abaddon Books on 13 June.



Who'd have suspected it was the creepy doll all along?



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

DOLL HOUSE

Conjuring sequel *Annabelle Comes Home* further expands the ever-growing horror-verse



She's back. Everyone's favourite creepy doll is returning for the third instalment in the *Annabelle* legend, and the seventh movie in the expanded universe that began with James Wan's 2013 chiller *The Conjuring*. After prequels *Annabelle* and *Annabelle: Creation*, the story shifts to after *The Conjuring*, as demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga) place the possessed Annabelle doll 'safely' behind glass in their artefacts room.

Needless to say, the doll has other ideas, awakening malevolent spirits to target the Warrens' 10 year-old daughter Judy (Mckenna Grace) and her babysitters (Madison Iseman, Katie Sarife). "I wanted it to take place over the course of one night," says Gary Dauberman, the writer of all three *Annabelle* movies, making his directorial debut here. "I knew it was going to take place in the Warren house, and we hadn't done that in any of the movies yet."

It also toys with that horror trope, the babysitter-in-peril. "I did love the throwback vibe," he adds. "It felt fresh for the franchise." While the Annabelle doll has been central to these stories, Dauberman believes demonising an everyday object works. "It's like the haunted house, right? Your house is supposed to be where you feel the most safe, and suddenly you find you're not alone. It makes it all the more creepy. That's how I view the doll too."

For Dauberman, as enjoyable as making this has been, the process has been tinged with sadness after the real Lorraine Warren passed away in April. "She was very sweet, very kind... she's the one who can sense auras, but I think everybody could sense she had some aura to her," he says. "Even for the briefest time I got to spend with her, it was very memorable and something that touched me." **JM**

Annabelle Comes Home opens on 28 June.



She couldn't believe she had the same outfit as the doll.

SCI-FACT! Moira Kirland worked with actor Paul Blackthorne on both *Medium* and *Arrow* before she cast him for *The InBetween*.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

GRAVE SIGHT

A young medium reluctantly helps her cop pop solve crimes in new supernatural procedural *The InBetween*



Think about how many genre shows there have been about people who have the power to “see” visions of the past, future, or the spectral plane. Yeah, it’s a lot. From *Firefly* to *The Ghost Whisperer*, there’s a plethora of series set around mediums trying to help others via their gift.

But how many shows revolve around the ones who aren’t so hot about helping?

New supernatural mystery, *The InBetween*, follows the path least taken with Cassie Bedford, a young woman who has chilling visions of dark things that happened, or will happen. She even interacts with dead folk that only she can see. None of it is fun or heartwarming for Cassie, which creates the space for some interesting storytelling.

For series creator/showrunner Moira Kirland, it’s an idea 15 years in the making. A veteran writer of similarly themed shows like *The Dead Zone* and *Medium*, even while working on those series, Kirland was interested in exploring the darker side of this particular breed of “gift.”

“I remember thinking, you see all of these psychics and psychic mediums, and they always seem to be so put together and calm about things,” Kirland tells *Red Alert*. “And I thought, ‘Boy, I feel like this sort of thing would really play havoc on your life. It would make your life difficult.’ So I had this idea of a girl who’s locked herself away.”

With the television landscape increasingly leaning towards horror, and antihero female leads, Kirland has finally found the right time

Harriet Dyer plays unhappy medium Cassie Bedford.



for her exploration. “*The InBetween* is the new version of those shows,” Kirland says. “It’s a little darker and a little weirder.”

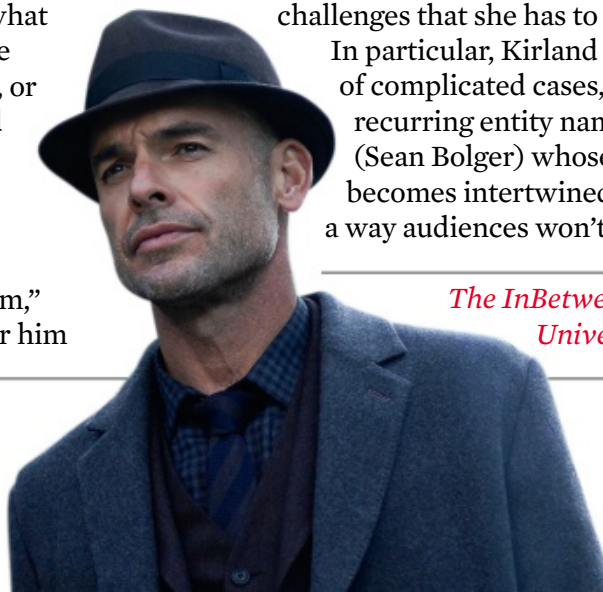
Tortured her whole life by her ability, Cassie lives alone in a dated house and isn’t exactly warm and friendly to anyone. She reluctantly assists her cop father, Tom Hackett (played by Paul Blackthorne) when she sees scenarios that help fill in the blanks for his more challenging cases. Kirland says what Cassie relays to him are more like puzzles, instead of literal visions, or clues. “I wanted to make it weird and something that needs to be interpreted. Tom even says several times, ‘Sometimes you’ve just got to sit with it.’”

“Being a cop is a calling for Tom,” Kirland continues. “It’s bigger for him

than a job, and he sees that in her. She doesn’t have any of his training, but what Tom is trying to do is to get her to see this as a calling too. So, the first season is really about Cassie accepting her gift. She’s finally admitting it’s not going anywhere, and if I’m going to have this, I’m going to use it. As the season progresses and she helps him more and more, she starts to get a handle on things, but there are some challenges that she has to deal with.”

In particular, Kirland promises a lot of complicated cases, and even a recurring entity named Ed Roven (Sean Bolger) whose existence becomes intertwined with Cassie’s in a way audiences won’t see coming. **TB**

The InBetween comes to Universal TV in June.



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MASSIVE EVENTS SHOWMASTERS

SCI-FACT! New showrunners, Andrew Chambliss and Ian Goldberg, were executive producers and writers on *Once Upon A Time*

"No fair, it's my turn with the magic stick."

Her glamping trip to the Cotswolds did not go well.

"Dude, where the hell are those magic mushrooms?"

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

TAKING FIVE

More undead veterans are making the leap to *Fear The Walking Dead*



Is it possible to live with a moral compass after the apocalypse?

That's a question *The Walking Dead* has explored, and now it's migrated to *Fear the Walking Dead*, specifically through Morgan Jones (Lennie James). A survivor from *The Walking Dead*'s pilot, Morgan is starting his second season on the spin-off series, doubling-down on his commitment to humanity with his intention of building a system to help other survivors in need.

Also starting their second season, as executive producers and co-showrunners, are Andrew Chambliss and Ian Goldberg, who tell *Red Alert* that what it means to do good is at the heart of the narrative this year.

"Our characters set out on this noble mission to find people to help them, to try to make the world a little bit better," Chambliss explains. "But they're going to find that the world may not make that as easy as they had hoped. And it's really going to make them be creative about how they go about doing it, really finding ways to prove to the world that what they're doing isn't in fact a noble mission. But what we're most interested about is it's also going to force everyone to look inward."

Surrounding Morgan is an eclectic group who all need some redemption. From series veterans Alicia (Alycia Debnam-Carey), Strand (Colman Domingo) and Daniel Salazar (Rubén Blades), to newcomers Althea (Maggie Grace), John Dorie (Garret Dillahunt) and June (Jenna Elfman) – they all have a lot of baggage. And the show will welcome former Savior Dwight (Austin Amelio) to deal with his sins, too.

Chambliss says of that crossover reunion, "Dwight and Morgan were part of the same larger story with the Savivors, but they hadn't spent

a ton of time together. This really is a chance to bring them together for the first time. And the interesting thing about Dwight is he's one of the few people in our crew now that actually knows Morgan's full history and saw it. He definitely will force Morgan, in some respect, to look back and not just see who he used to be, but how far he's come in his journey."

Another native reunion will be between returning cast member Blades and Domingo's Strand, who's been trying to be a better man since season four. "He's confronted with the man who is a reminder of perhaps one of his greatest sins, one of the first people that he tried to kill," Chambliss says. "It's essentially his past coming back to haunt him. And not giving away too much about the specifics of it, but Strand is going to find himself in a very precarious position where perhaps he needs something from Daniel Salazar."

As for how it will all play out, Goldberg teases, "There's going to be lots of action, lots of scope, maybe even bigger than what we did last season. We're telling a great big emotional story, and it won't have the same structure as last year. You'll be surprised." **TB**

Fear The Walking Dead Season Five airs on AMC UK from 3 June.

SCI-FACT! Asked about the *TNG* crew possibly appearing in the *Picard* spin-off, Sirtis claims: "We know nothing about Patrick's show."



AFTERLIFE CELEBRATING ICONIC SCI-FI STARS

151

JOE CRAMER

*David Scott Freeman in Flight
Of The Navigator*



Vancouver-born Joe Cramer was the 13-year-old star of *Flight Of The Navigator* – the story of an ordinary kid who accidentally hitchhikes a ride on a spaceship and ends up eight years in the future. His adult life has been rather less glamorous, however, and in 2016 – after several run-ins with the law – Cramer pled guilty to charges of bank robbery. He's now telling his story in *Life After The Navigator*, a documentary in production from the makers of *Life After Flash*. (lifeafterthenavigator.com)

Would you like to go back to the role?

It was such an awesome experience and I would love to do something. I think it would be cool to do some kind of futuristic sequel where I'm the dad and I have a kid who goes on an adventure somehow. They've talked about reboots and stuff like that, which I don't *think* are going to happen. We'll see what happens, though.

Where would David be now?

I don't want to give it away really, because I have some pretty clear ideas of how it could work as this futuristic thing. We'll see.

Get any souvenirs from the set?

I wish! There was cool stuff on the set that I would've loved to have had looking back on it. I really wanted a Puckmaren [the tiny alien David befriends in the movie], but my friend made me one. I brought it to Comic-Con and took pictures.

What would be David's epitaph?

"See you later, navigator!" That would make sense, right? **RE**

ALAMY (1)

Sirtis will be treading the boards on planet Earth.



STAR EXCLUSIVE

TROI STORY

Art imitates life as *Star Trek: TNG*'s **Marina Sirtis** makes her West End debut...



I thought I was reading me!" says

Marina Sirtis of new play *Dark Sublime*.

"I just attached to it on a visceral level.

I've never played a part that's so close to me in real life, and that's terrifying because it's a vulnerability that I kind of lay all out there."

Sirtis (aka Counsellor Deanna Troi on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) plays Marianne, former star of *Dark Sublime*, a late-'70s/early '80s sci-fi show on ITV. It's the story of her relationship with an old friend and what happens when a young fan pays her a visit.

"I remember Tom Baker talking in an interview about the purity of fan love, how it's an uncorruptible thing and it's much more powerful than ordinary love," debut writer Michael Dennis tells *Red Alert*. "Through the play we explore Marianne's unrequited love for her friend and Oli's fan love for Marianne, and the parallels and differences between them."

The play will feature "excerpts" from *Dark Sublime* – Mark Gatiss cameos as the voice of

the computer – and Dennis says he was keen to capture the essence of the era that birthed *Sapphire & Steel* and *The Tomorrow People*.

"British TV at the time was still drawing heavily on the sort of televised theatre tradition, which is an incredibly different aesthetic from the drama we're used to on television now," explains Dennis. "It's incredibly evocative and it reeks of the late-'70s in a way that it doesn't of any other time."

Sirtis's experiences on the Enterprise bridge were clearly different to Marianne's, but she could see where Dennis was coming from.

"I watched *Doctor Who* as I kid, so I knew all about the chintzy scenery and the effects," she laughs. "There was a kind of a style to British sci-fi back then, and through you I'm going to say to Michael, 'Don't worry love, I know what you mean!'" **RE**

Dark Sublime runs at Trafalgar Studios in London from 25 June to 3 August.

SCI-FACT! *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood's sequel to the first Clarke winner *The Handmaid's Tale*, will be published in September

SHORTLIST EXCLUSIVE

THE CLARKE AWARD

The lowdown on the cutting-edge SF novels up for the prestigious literary award



The Clarke Award, says its director Tom Hunter, is in rude health.

This year the award received 124 submissions, compared to 46 a decade ago. These are figures that reflect how a mix of publishers, both literary and genre imprints, now value the prize so highly. It also reflects, says Hunter, how so many writers, from all kinds of backgrounds, are “playing with science fiction’s toolkit” as they tackle subjects such as climate change.

It makes Hunter optimistic for the Clarke’s future: “I’m thinking how do we get to 50 [in 2037] and what will we look like at that point?”

SEMIOSIS Sue Burke (HarperVoyager)

→ Escaping conflict on Earth, idealistic settlers arrive on Pax, where they have plans to build a utopian society. Except Pax already has smart inhabitants: plants that have domesticated and even slaughtered the native fauna. A novel from a Chicago-based Clarion workshop alumnus that takes the SF staple of first contact somewhere new and unexpected. Fellow SF authors have been fulsome in their praise.

Status: Decent outside bet

REVENANT GUN

Yoon Ha Lee (Solaris)

→ The conclusion to the *Machineries of Empire* trilogy confirms Yoon Ha Lee’s status as one of the leading lights in whatever we’re calling the latest iteration of space opera. Opener *Ninefox Gambit* (2016) was also Clarke nominated, yet this is a stronger book, notable for the way Baton Rouge-based Lee pulls together plot strands while showing us his exotic fictional universe from new angles.

Status: Ace outsider

FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

Ahmed Saadawi (Oneworld)

→ On the streets of US-occupied Baghdad, junk dealer Hadi collects body parts. Why? To stitch them together so that this kit corpse might get a decent burial rather than its constituent parts be ignored, as would otherwise happen. Then the body goes missing and a series of eerie murders afflicts the city. Iraqi writer and filmmaker Saadawi updates Mary Shelley’s SF urtext with mordant wit.

Status: Contender

THE ELECTRIC STATE

Simon Stålenhag (Simon & Schuster)

→ Define what constitutes a novel... Simon Stålenhag creates SF images that mix the everyday and the fantastical. In *The Electric State*, a book of sparse prose, his artwork is central to the tale of Michelle, who, accompanied by her toy robot Skip, heads out on an American road trip in search of her missing brother. Beautiful and melancholy.

Status: Really, why not?

ROSEWATER Tade Thompson (Orbit)

→ After aliens land, human society is changed forever. Not least in a near-future Nigeria, where a vast dome of off-world origins opens once a year, and the sick are cured and, inconveniently, the undead raised as zombies. Anglo-Nigerian Tade Thompson’s debut takes equal measures of cyberpunk, biopunk and afrofuturism, and shakes them up in unexpected ways.

Status: Not to jinx, but Thompson’s year?

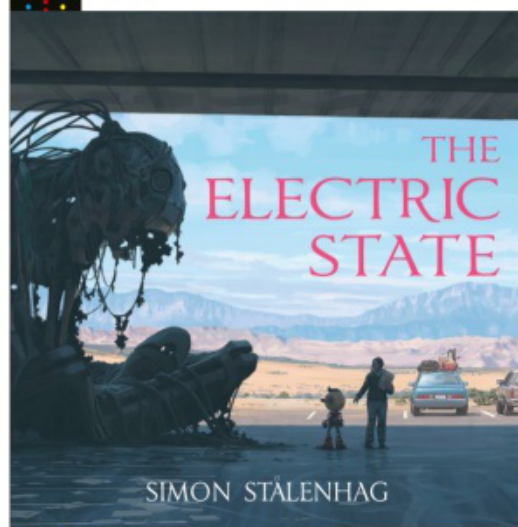
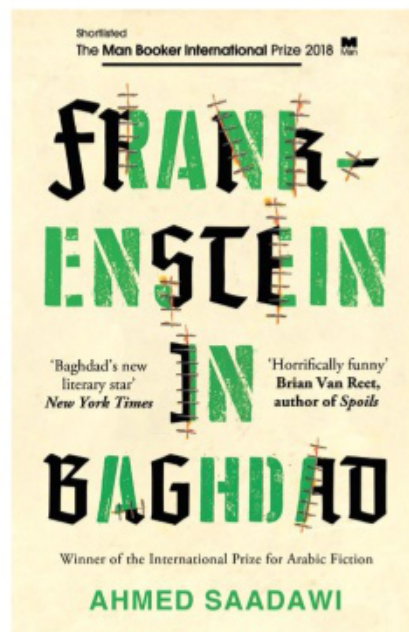
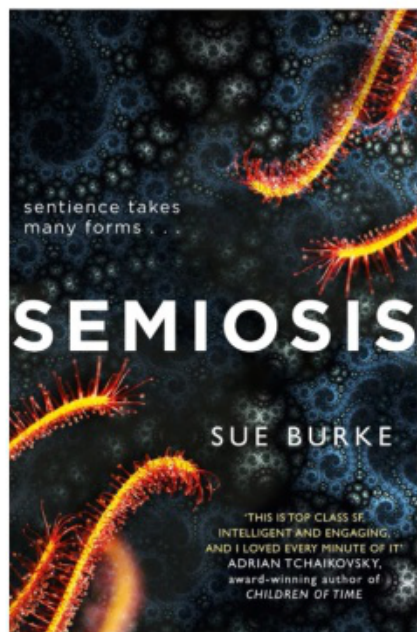
THE LOOSENING SKIN

Aliya Whiteley (Unsung Stories)

→ Every seven years, the characters in this weird thriller shed their skins. In the process, they effectively leave behind their old lives. But what happens if you moult more often? Or what if you take a drug, Suscutin, that enables you to keep your old skin? A big-hearted novel about love and loss, told with panache.

Status: A possible contender **JW**

The Clarke Award winner will be announced on Wednesday 17 July.



All six of this year's finalists are a terrific read.



SCI-FACT! Miller and Romita Jr. chronicled Daredevil's early days in 1993 miniseries, *Man Without Fear*.



NEWS WARP HIGH-SPEED FACTS

→ By the power of Grayskull! Noah Centineo is the new He-Man in the **Masters Of The Universe** reboot.

→ Rami Malek and Ana de Armas joining **Bond 25**, now filming in Jamaica.

→ **Fantastic Beasts 3** to be released 12 November 2021.

→ *The Conjuring's* James Wan producing big-screen version of Stephen King's **Salem's Lot**.

→ Terry Rawlings, editor of *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, has died aged 85.

→ Travis Knight to direct bionic remake **The Six Billion Dollar Man**.

→ Quentin Tarantino says his **Star Trek** movie is still "a very big possibility".

→ Michelle Yeoh joining the **Avatar** sequels. She'll play Dr Karina Mogue.

→ John Goodman and Billy Crystal voicing Sully and Mike in **Monsters At Work**, a *Monsters Inc* spin-off coming to Disney+ in 2020.



GETTY (1)

WRITER/ARTIST EXCLUSIVE

STRANGE VISITOR

Frank Miller and John Romita Jr. reveal the origins of the Man of Steel in ***Superman: Year One***

→ While he has long been associated with *Batman*, Frank Miller is a massive fan of the Man of Steel. Now, with artist John Romita Jr., the *Dark Knight Returns* creator is embarking upon his first series starring the Metropolis Marvel in *Superman: Year One*, a three-issue, large-size miniseries from DC's Black Label imprint.

"DC executive editor Dan Didio asked me if I'd be interested in doing Superman, and my response was, 'I thought you'd never ask!'" laughs Miller. "Out of all the superheroes, Superman is the one I've been wanting to have a crack at. He was the first superhero I fell in love with, as before I could even read I watched the old Fleischer cartoons on TV. That was probably the biggest thing that got me into comic books, so this was just a wonderful challenge and opportunity."

Miller believes it has much in common with *Batman: Year One*, his 1987 series with David Mazzucchelli. "The goal is the same on both books, which in this case is to introduce the myth of Superman to someone who has never heard of him before," he explains. "They could pick this up, knowing nothing about Superman and walk away knowing everything they need to know."

With the first issue alone moving from his final hours on Krypton to his school days in Smallville, *Superman: Year One* spans considerably more than 12 months. "It takes in years one through to 21," says Miller. "We see him learning about the mighty power and all the abilities he has got within him, and how he became the 'man' part of Superman."

Romita Jr. was impressed by how Miller highlights the impact being raised by John and Martha Kent had. "I hadn't thought about it until I was working on all these vignettes in this kid's life, where his father says 'easy, don't show off,' and his mother is worried about him," he reflects. "That then gets supersized when you think about how these two Kansas farmers affected this incredible super being." **SJ**

Superman: Year One kicks off on 19 June



Superman: Year One takes us through Supes' early years.

“DON'T QUOTE ME”

“ONLY ONE WILL BE THERE AT THE END – LIKE HIGHLANDER.”

The only thing more exciting than the title race according to Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp? Christopher Lambert sci-fi classic *Highlander*.



SCI-FACT! Executive producer Jeffrey Bell was the showrunner for the final epic season of Joss Whedon's other series, *Angel*.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

SECOND LIFE

Coulson is back from the dead (again) for *Agents Of SHIELD* season six



When *Agents of SHIELD* hit its 100th episode in season five, just about everyone assumed the stretch of episodes afterwards would culminate in the series finale. Showrunners Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen even titled it "The End," but as it turns out, it wasn't.

The series got picked up for two final seasons, so if you thought there was already closure in the season five finale, as Coulson (Clark Gregg) spent his dying days with May (Ming-Na Wen) in Tahiti, well then... surprise, there wasn't.

Clark Gregg is definitely back for season six, but as executive producer Jeffrey Bell tells *Red Alert*, he's only going to be an A.I. version of Coulson to give current director of SHIELD, Mack (Henry Simmons) some more support. But the actor is going to spend the majority of screen time as a new, enigmatic character known as Sarge.

Confused? Bell explains, "The other characters in the show are going through exactly what the audience is at home, which is, who is this guy? What does he want? Why does he look like Coulson? What the hell is going on? That is a central mystery. That's not the only mystery..."

He also stresses this is a carefully considered narrative path for Coulson. "The most important thing really for us was to not trivialise Coulson's death, and to buy it back cheaply. And for Clark, it was assuring him that what we're going to do had the same scope and gravitas and importance as what he'd been doing. He's just doing it on the other side of the aisle. What's great about Clark is he's really embracing this new character, and we were like, 'Wow, there's a lot of swagger in this guy!' To see Clark play someone so different was really satisfying for us."

Storylines echo those in the MCU films, such as the shape-shifting Skrulls in *Captain Marvel*. Since season six is heading to space and Sarge looks like Coulson, might there be a connection? Bell only says, "I'd say in terms of the types of stories we can tell, look at the Marvel movies coming out ahead of us and they possibly open up some new doors."

So, how will the rest of the team react to a newbie with a Coulson face? "It's not unreasonable to think that Daisy (Chloe Bennet) and May would be the most shaken by someone looking like him," Bell teases. He says both women will have differing perspectives on this new person, and as such will bring about some rich interactions with Gregg.

Bell hopes pairing actors in new ways will excite fans. "Whenever you do that, you can find fresh things to talk about. We've a lot of that in season six and we also have the addition of Deke (Jeff Ward). And then the flavour of Sarge comes with some friends and it's an interesting group." **TB**

Agents Of SHIELD is on ABC in the US now, and E4 soon.

"If your name's not down you're not coming in, mate."

SCI-FACT! Oakmont was designed with the help of actual urban planners.

DEVELOPER EXCLUSIVE

LOVECRAFT ACTUALLY

Investigate an eldritch mystery
in videogame *The Sinking City*

Oakmont is wetter
than an English
summer.



There's a good chance you've read a story by master of horror HP Lovecraft, but stepping inside one for Lovecraft-inspired detective game *The Sinking City* is a different kettle of (freaky) fish. Playing as former US Marine turned private eye Charles Reed, you head to the city of Oakmont to find out the truth behind your strange dreams of tentacled things terrorising a city. Its inhabitants are trudging on despite being in the grip of a bizarre flood that's turned streets into rivers, infesting them with strange, unknowable monsters. Naturally, Reed ends up unravelling a plot involving a cult and forbidden secrets that threaten not just the city, but the wider world.

"In a way the detective gameplay has evolved from [our] Sherlock Holmes titles, but the finer details are different," says Wael Amr, CEO of developer Frogware (they've made several well-received Sherlock games over the years). "You have to look at the map itself, find

where you need to go with the pinned evidence and [use] our world's intelligent system to find further information."

In other words, it's up to you to follow the clues: pursuing a lead to a police station or researching the local newspaper's archives. There's plenty of places to find hints, such as talking to the curious cast of characters (including an extremely rich ape man, and the city's half-fish population), but it puts the onus of investigation on you, which makes playing as a detective feel very satisfying.

"The Lovecraft work is about the insignificance of the human being inside the universe, but that makes the topics universal," explains Amr. "It's always been fascinating for me to look at this literary work that takes place in reality." **OT-K**

The Sinking City is released on PS4, Xbox One and PC on 27 June 2019.

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**HOT
TOPIC**

Your views on
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#STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER TRAILER

➔ **Christian Horsfield, email**

After the division caused by *The Last Jedi*, my enthusiasm for Episode IX had waned.

However, the new trailer has firmly restored my hope in the galaxy far, far away! The action looked fantastic and the familiar sight of Lando and Chewie in the Falcon, the sensitive use of old footage of Carrie Fisher, the mirroring of *The Phantom Menace* trailer and the glimpse of the Death Star were evidence of a clear attempt to link the closing episode of the Skywalker saga to Episodes I to VI.

➔ **Robert William Graham, Facebook**

Like everyone else my jaw dropped at that familiar laugh at the end. To quote Han Solo in *Return Of The Jedi*, I know that laugh!

➔ **Andy Wintrip, GamesRadar**

Looks like we're in for more lazy, fan-baiting drivel as more original trilogy characters are plucked out and potentially ruined by these sequels. I find it really worrying that simply



adding Palpatine's laugh is enough to generate hype simply because fans are desperate to ride the nostalgia wave in order to love this series again. And Disney knows it. Other than that, it looks great.

➔ **Steven Leech, Facebook**

The Death Star scene appears to follow on from the concepts shown in *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens* book, but why would they go there? For Vader's lightsaber? For Palpatine? Or just a red herring in the trailer?

➔ **Ken Scott, Facebook**

The trailer looks great – but so did *The Last Jedi*'s and that was a real dog's dinner. I'm sure JJ will restore the trilogy to the promise shown in *The Force Awakens*.

➔ **Ian Gleeson, Facebook**

Looks like a big mystery box of plagiarised nothing is on the cards again!

SFX *Once you start down the cynical path, forever will it dominate your destiny!*

➔ **Fahri M Fahri, Facebook**

The use of the name Skywalker (does it refer to Leia? Rey? Ben Solo adopting his mother's maiden name? Luke returning?) in the title and the Sidious/Palpatine laugh near the end of the trailer are certainly major talking points. The fans who didn't like *The Last Jedi* will all certainly be hoping for a much better film to end this trilogy.

➔ **Thomas Huartson, Facebook**

Chewie and Lando better drink to Han, that's all I'm saying!

SFX *Ever tried a glass of Garrmorl? That stuff damn near blows your fur off.*

➔ **Jens Sylvester Wesemann, Facebook**

JJ Abrams just can't do without his silly, empty mystery box nonsense and thriving on nostalgia, can he?

➔ **Gary Mancini, Facebook**

I was adamant that I was out on the rest of this sequel trilogy. I'd packed my bags and said goodbye to *Star Wars*. However, this had me taking a peek around the door, and maybe I'll stick around just a bit longer. It looks bloody good! And the title – from the first mention I said that it didn't refer to a person. It's Skywalker as an ideology, or a religion like Jedi.

➔ **Ash Ryan, Facebook**

Maybe Skywalker refers to a midichlorian "bloodline", starting with the Sith created messiah/Anti-Christ Anakin, and flowing to the completion of the prophecy of the one who will bring balance to the Force. Maybe it's not a single person, but a process.

➔ **Nate Melander, Facebook**

There was nothing engaging about it, and the Palpatine laugh made me roll my eyes. The hero Luke died an inglorious death and they supposedly bring back a very dead bad guy. It all symbolises the death of *Star Wars* in the 2000s and Disney trying to revive a horrible new version that has no reason to exist.

➔ **Ade Lucas, GamesRadar**

Knowing the way this has gone I doubt if anything will come of the Palpatine laugh at the end. It's probably an old recording or something that activates when they try to activate Death Star 2's systems.

➔ **Joe Fernandez, Twitter**

Maybe Palpatine *did* learn the secret of immortality from Darth Plagueis the Wise?

➔ **Kobeyashi Maru, Twitter**

I've got a bad feeling about this... Going back to an old baddie long dead is unimaginative. I fear this will be *Return Of The Jedi* all over.

➔ **Brit Bong, GamesRadar**

I'm interested, but not without a little wariness and some trepidation. It certainly looks like it's returning to the mythological elements of *Star Wars* which were so eagerly deconstructed in *The Last Jedi*. That's what gives me hope.

THIS MONTH'S COMMUNICATIONS MONITOR

**NICK SETCHFIELD,
EDITOR-AT-LARGE**

The teaser trailer for *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker* brought a great disturbance to the SFX mailbox this month, as if millions of voices had cried out in excitement... with the occasional "Meh" mixed in too. Also this issue: your thoughts on *Avengers: Endgame*, the *Star Trek: Discovery* finale and that episode of *Game Of Thrones* brought to you in glorious Murk-o-Vision™. One lucky scribbler wins a copy of *Solar War* by John French, courtesy of our chums at the Black Library.

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“Chewie and Lando better drink to Han, that’s all I’m saying!”

OUTSTANDING AVENGERS

Robert Graham, email

Avengers: Endgame is not just the best MCU movie so far but just might be the best superhero movie that has ever been made. Up till now I thought nothing could beat *The Dark Knight* but *Avengers: Endgame* is an epic on a huge scale that I haven’t seen since *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. It’s a spectacular sci-fi superhero action adventure movie that raises the bar not just for Marvel but all superhero movies.

Oliver Waterman, email

Endgame was a satisfying conclusion to all that’s happened since Robert Downey Jr did a spot of crafty ironmongery in Afghanistan... well, satisfying in every way except one. Am I the only one who thought that bit with the bench completely betrayed the character of Captain America? Sorry, I just don’t buy that Steve would sit around at home while Hydra infiltrated SHIELD and Thanos unleashed the Chitauri on New York! This is the man who threw himself on a grenade to save others, remember? He’s a fighter, not a quitter.

SFX Personally, we’re looking forward to Disney’s streaming service bringing us Steve And Peggy: The Scrabble Years.

STAR PRIZE



The Llama God, The Well-Lit and Clearly-Focused Lands North of the Wall, email

As everyone’s favourite two-time hand could tell them: bigger isn’t necessarily better. But unfortunately I very much doubt that the *Game Of Thrones* producers would be listening to that advice.

Touted as being longer than the Battle of Helm’s Deep, “The Long Night” was certainly that. And I can see what they were going for – every single *Game Of Thrones* fan loves that bit in the Battle of the Bastards where Jon Snow gets all smothered and squashed, because that really does convey how scary it all is. But without any moments of clarity to engage with the characters it became impossible for the audience to connect with, and it



turned the whole thing into a very confused slog. And as for the extremely dubious lighting choices, I think the Red Lady said it best – the night is dark and full of errors...

SFX Shame it’s too late for an X-Files crossover. Those FBI flashlights would have been a huge help.

DISCOVERY DELIGHT

Rob Graham, email

The *Star Trek Discovery* season two finale was absolutely superb. Season three now means that *Star Trek* can start completely fresh in the 32nd century, although I can’t help thinking that if they had done that from the beginning it would have stopped a lot of arguments about technology...

Bob Pierce, email

Wow! I’m probably in the minority but the *Discovery* finale was probably the best episode of *Star Trek* I’ve ever seen! I was getting a bit tired of this season, but... everything seems to be nicely wrapped up and all anomalies resolved. The only question is are we getting a season three?

SFX Good news, Bob. Sensors indicate season three is now in development, with “much bigger problems” promised on the other side of that wormhole...

HELLBOY? HELL NO!

Mike Garner, email I can’t believe that you gave the new *Hellboy* film two-and-a-half stars. It’s an absolutely awful movie. It’s as if it was written and directed by a bunch of people who once read some *Hellboy* comics but couldn’t quite remember all the reasons why they liked it. It’s not acted very well, either – Ian McShane really phones it in. Also, those English accents must be classed as a hate crime!

SFX If those English accents are a hate crime surely Dick Van Dyke should have done 40 years in solitary...

“I really need a holiday after all that!”

Rants & Raves

INSIDE THE SFX HIVE MIND

JORDAN FARLEY
ACTING EDITOR
RAVES

→ Was a thrill to attend this year’s Star Wars Celebration. Highlights: Ian McDiarmid appearing on stage after *The Rise Of Skywalker* panel, The Mandalorian footage and the person who dressed as the island of Ahch-To, complete with seven independently operated Porgs.



IAN BERRIMAN
DEPUTY EDITOR
RAVES

→ Best new thing on social media: @christophereccleston on Instagram, featuring the Ninth Doctor menacingly brandishing a ping pong bat, and telling people to “f**k off”. And here’s a neat idea: soundtracks for books like *The Day of the Triffids*! And I could play cassettes! (bibliotapes.co.uk)



IAIN NOBLE
PRODUCTION EDITOR
RAVES

→ Re-reading *Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers*. An absolute classic!



RANTS
→ After *The Last Jedi* I had pretty much given up hope of Disney producing a decent *Star Wars* movie, and I’m afraid the latest trailer has done nothing to change my mind.

JON COATES
ART EDITOR
RAVES

→ The Mandalorian footage from Celebration looked incredible. Although I was surprised by how much dialogue the character appeared to have – imagined he’d be quieter and gruffer, like Boba (circa *Empire* and *Jedi*), whereas they seem to be pitching this guy closer to Han Solo from what we’ve seen.



NICK SETCHFIELD
EDITOR-AT-LARGE
RAVES

→ Hello! No, the Phantom Zone can’t hold me. Nice to be back in these pages. I loved *Endgame*, it felt like one of those giant Treasury Edition blowouts. Pure oversized comic book bliss! And it’s good to know Bond 25 will return to Jamaica – we need some blue-skied dazzle after *Spectre*.





OFF THE MAP

Not mapping your fantasy world can be a good thing, says **Tom Lloyd**



The Land, the setting for Tom's series *The Twilight Reign*.

“CAN A MAP
DETRACT FROM
FANTASY
RATHER THAN
IMPROVE IT?”



ONE THING I LEARNED EARLY IN MY WRITING career as a fantasy novelist was that people get really animated about maps. Weirdly so, I thought at first, but then of course I joined Twitter and got to experience the debate To Map Or Not To Map in full.

A 2007ish, idle comment by the author of the *First Law* series Joe Abercrombie (well before he became the all-powerful ruler of the genre he is today) sparked quite a debate on the subject. Do fantasy books need a map? He came down against them, although I don't think Joe was ever as militant about it as some believed, especially in light of his later books containing some. But there was a fair point to be made nonetheless: can a map actually detract from fantasy, rather than improve it?

For my own part, I had a map in my first series. Then an unpublished city plan for my second. And finally, about the sketchiest idea of place possible for my third. Now these books were all different types, but for me, the map, or lack thereof, characterised something more than just how complex the world or plot was. It spoke to what *kind* of books these were and how I was going to write them. Having different levels of map created alongside them meant they came from very different processes and formed into very different stories.

After 12 books now, I don't want writing to become “just a job”, and I definitely can't just make myself write the same kind of thing over and over. I'd simply slow down, and at some point I'd stop. Much of the day-to-day process of writing isn't very interesting. Without variety, I might not see enough worth to continue. The certainty of a series is a comforting thing, but it can become a rut if you let it.

My first two series were heavily planned out, but for the *God Fragments* books I had two main images as my starting point, and not a whole lot else. I'd decided that I needed to change how I worked. Not because it wasn't working, but simply because my habits needed to evolve. The lack of a map characterised this. I wanted to focus on a small-scale story (yes, I know there are world-changing events, but still...), rather than get bogged down about the wider tapestry. Without a map, I kept reaching the edges of what I knew. That made me think and work differently.

Sometimes a map can be hugely useful, but here I wanted a simple tale of adventure. My happy band of gun-toting drunks don't care much about the places they visit – wake them up, sober them up, load them up, and point them at someone or something that needs killing. That's their story.

If I've done my job right, there should be no need for the reader to consult a map. I feel you need to set yourself challenges as a writer as the years go by, and mine was writing map-less. Without a reason to be excited or pushed by it, writing fantasy books, like any work, becomes a chore. My only question now is what I will do differently for the next story.



Knight Of Stars, the latest book in the *God Fragments* series, is released by Gollancz on 27 June.



Penny Dreadful

SFX's high priestess of horror

SINGLE FRENCH FEMALE

➔ I like to bang on about how horror *isn't* mean-spirited and is actually all about hope and the will to survive. Well this month it's not! If there's a theme this month, it's that everyone is awful. First of all there's **Greta**, an enjoyably bonkers throwback to the "bitches be crazy" subgenre which brought us *Fatal Attraction*, *Single White Female* and *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*. In this iteration the nutter is elegant, tiny French lady Isabelle Huppert, and the target of her obsession warm-hearted Chloë Grace Moretz, who makes the grave mistake of returning Huppert's handbag after she leaves it on the subway. Huppert's obviously having a marvellous time with the genre and the two play terrifically off each other, but the moral of the film does seem to be "only hang out with people your own age and don't be nice to anyone, ever". Highly silly, mildly offensive, worth a watch.

WELSH SCAREBIT

➔ In further horror-movies-titled-with-girls'-names-beginning-with-G news, wistful folk chiller **Gwen** is getting a limited theatrical release from 19 July. A very frustrating movie, this. Set in 19th century Wales, it's absolutely gorgeous to look at and massively atmospheric as a young girl (Eleanor Worthington-Cox) and her mum (Maxine Peake) struggle to survive on their windswept farm after a mining company encroaches on their land. The movie keeps teasing that it'll turn into something like *The Witch* at any minute but, believe me, no one in *Gwen* gets to live deliciously. It's one of the bleakest movies I've seen this year, as disaster after disaster befalls the family and any glimmers of hope are squashed. And the big reveal at its heart is basically that people are utter bastards. Grim.

This issue:
absolutely everyone
in horror movies is
basically terrible.



SILENCE: NOT GOLDEN

➔ There's a bit in new Netflix movie **The Silence** where the deaf girl, her mum and dad and her brother arrive at a house that looks very much like the house in *A Quiet Place*, and suddenly everything was too meta and my head exploded. It's based on the novel by Tim Lebbon that has essentially the same plot and characters as *A Quiet Place* (deaf girl, hearing family, monsters attracted to sound). The book was first published in 2015, well before *A Quiet Place*, which went into pre-production in March 2017, while the movie of *The Silence* started pre-production in August 2017. Sad times for Lebbon all round, since the movie of his book is awful. Kiernan Shipka plays completely unconvincing deaf person Ally, while Stanley Tucci is her "mildly peeved in the face of a swarm of killer bat monsters" father. *The Silence* adds a crazy cult and a rapey bit to the mix, but even a sprinkling of *Handmaid's Tale* can't save it. I'm now reading Lebbon's book as an act of solidarity.

BLACKWOODS GLANCE

➔ The first trailer for **We Have Always Lived In The Castle** is with us, and I can't wait! This is the adaptation of Shirley

Jackson's wonderful 1962 novel about sisters Merricat (Taissa Farmiga) and Constance (Alexandra Daddario) Blackwood, who live in an isolated mansion with their Uncle Julian and are hated by the local villagers after the suspicious poisoning of their parents. "The world is full of terrible people..." Merricat says in the trailer – yes, exactly! What I love about this story is the acceptance, bond and love between the two sisters. For a tense tale of escalating horror, it's actually rather sweet and life-affirming. Done right this could be a delight. ●

Dreadful thing to do

Fan of creatures of the night? Head to the International Vampire Film & Arts Festival, which this year will be taking place in London from 10-13 July. Expect screenings of new and classic films, special guests, signings, seminars and several parties. If you're into all things vamp, check out ivfaf.com for more info.



ILLUSION

by Paula Volsky, 1992

Rena Rossner revisits a tale of revolution and magic



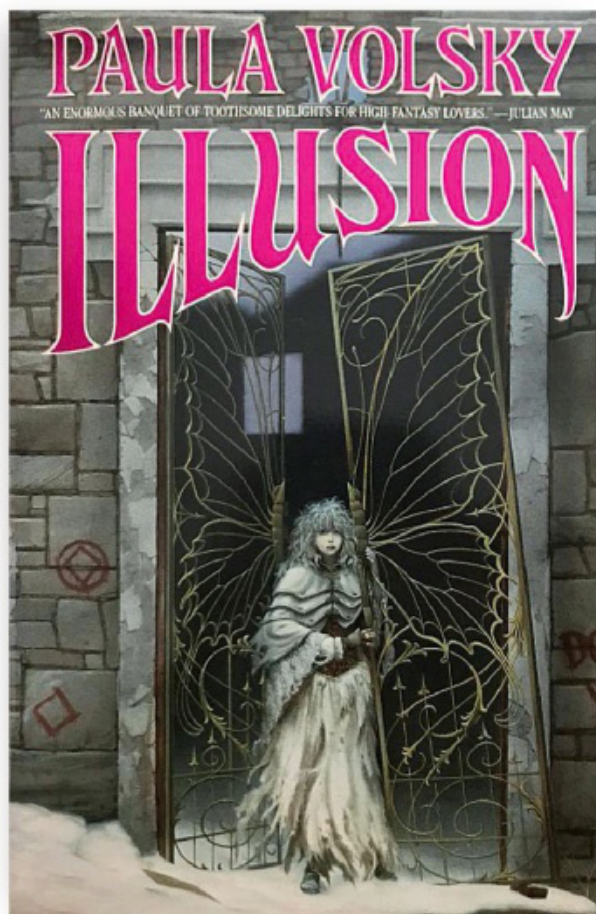
IT'S HARD TO PLACE PAULA Volsky's *Illusion* in the canon of fantasy literature. Part alternate history, part revolution re-telling, with a touch of a secondary world feel, it feels like a cross-between Gaslamp and Steampunk before those terms were as commonplace as they are now. It's almost Steelpunk in its sensibilities, and if written now might almost be considered YA (it's certainly a coming of age story) if not for its length, its literary language and its lavish historical detail.

Until Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel* series was published, it was hard to point to another series of books that does quite what Volsky does in *Illusion* and the other entries in her Parallel Universe series. It combines an almost unnatural feeling of familiarity with the

“Volsky’s work has a mastery of both language and illusion”

historical events described with a fresh, unique magic system, and a world that feels so much like our own but both old and new at the same time. There's a mastery of both language and yes, illusion, in Volsky's work that sadly feels unrecognised today.

Born into a world of wealth and privilege that's both lush and viciously stratified, Volsky's heroine, Eliste vo Derrivale, knows right from wrong – as best she can. When she can't keep her father from murdering her handmaiden Stelli's intended, she helps Stelli's brother, Dref, to escape his clutches, before escaping herself as a Maid of Honour to Queen Lallazay in Shereen, the capital of Vonahr. But there's unrest in the capital, and soon the monarchy is toppled by Whiss v'Aleur – a republican who soon begins a reign of terror of his own, aided by magical, sentient steel beasts (including an Iron Maiden named Kokette).



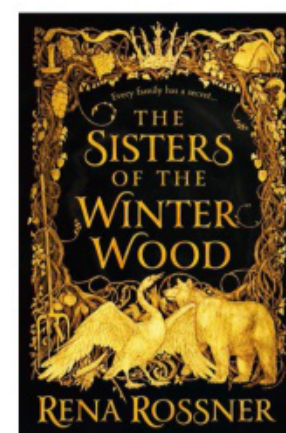
Stripped of her rank, her wealth and her family, Eliste watches in horror as other members of the Exalted class are murdered in cold blood around her. Luckily for her, she stumbles upon Dref again, a true democrat and leader of the revolution, and this time the tables are turned. He takes her in and saves her life. Together, they must find a way to stop Whiss v'Aleur. Eliste's Uncle Quinz is the key – and only by using v'Aleur's own Illusionist magic against him do they have a hope of defeating him.

A magical retelling of the French Revolution with echoes of the Russian Revolution, *Illusion* is very much a novel for our times. While it's impossible not to get lost in its lavish descriptions of courtly splendour, that world is juxtaposed with an equally thorough depiction of the squalor of the peasant class. In its exploration of the themes of social class and revolt, this is a book that's as politically alluring as it is sensually tempting, and as current now as it was when it was written. History repeats itself, the pages of *Illusion* whisper to us over and over again. Its portrayal of how quickly a monarchy can be toppled, only to be replaced by a dictator who claims to operate in the name of the people, is chilling. Power corrupts, always, and is perhaps always an illusion.

Eliste is a survivor – a heroine for the ages, and though you may not love that the book is written from her perspective (a member of the spoiled ruling class), she's a good judge of character and has street smarts. You may not like her from the get-go, but she has a way of growing on you. And although the romance is a really minor part of the book, there's a delicacy to it that's endearing, and it's delightfully slow burning – if you like that kind of thing.

Illusion remains highly original, highly sophisticated fantasy at its best. ●

The Sisters Of The Winter Wood by Rena Rossner is released in paperback by Orbit on 20 June.

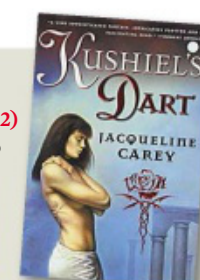


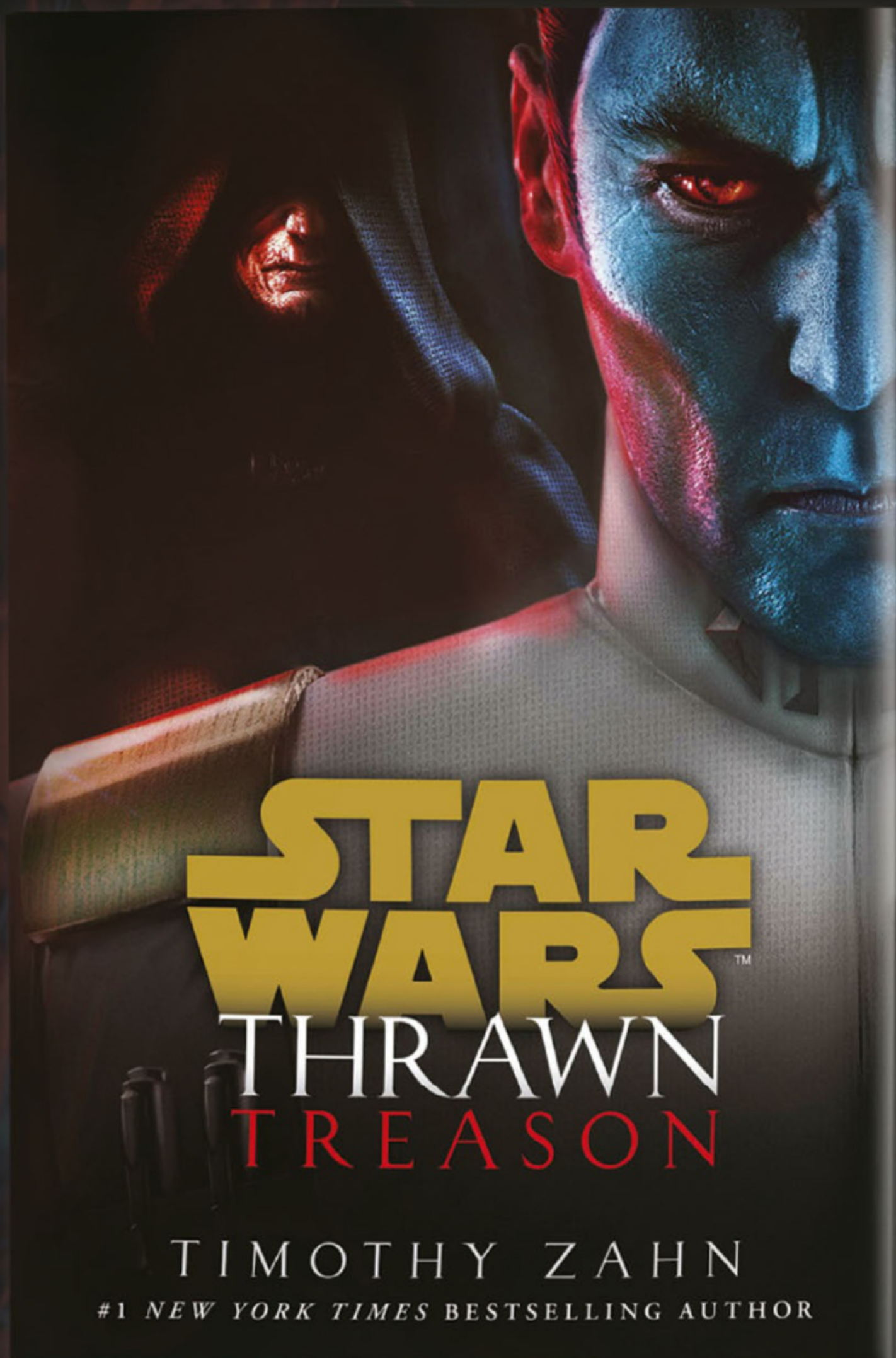
Like this? Try these!

THE WOLF OF WINTER
by PAULA VOLSKY (1993)
→ The second Parallel Universe book is set in a country resembling 18th century Russia, and has the same dazzling combination of magic and alternate history as the first.

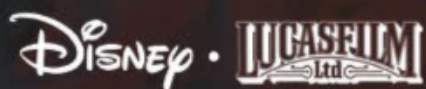


KUSHIEL'S DART
by JACQUELINE CAREY (2002)
→ Carey's tale of a woman sold into indentured slavery becoming an unlikely heroine has the same mix of pageantry, lush descriptions, magic and alternate history.





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LAYSTATION





THE MAN IN THE IRON

STAR WARS IS ABOUT TO SCORE BIG ON TV WITH LIVE-ACTION SERIES **THE MANDALORIAN**, NO DISINTEGRATIONS NECESSARY. JORDAN FARLEY GOT A SNEAK PEEK AT THIS YEAR'S STAR WARS CELEBRATION

POP QUIZ: HOW MANY LINES DOES BOBA Fett have in *The Empire Strikes Back*? If you said “four”, give yourself a pat on the back. Few characters in cinema history have made a bigger impression with such minimal screentime for no reason other than the fact they look really flippin’ cool. So it comes as little surprise that Lucasfilm’s

first ever live-action *Star Wars* series, set to debut on new streaming service Disney+ later this year, should centre on a Mandalorian’s (mis)adventures through the galaxy.

Played by *Game Of Thrones*’ Red Viper, Pedro Pascal, the eponymous Mandalorian has the potential to be every bit as enigmatic and charismatic as *Star Wars*’ most notorious bounty hunter. He even has one over Boba Fett in the mysterious stakes – no one even knows his name. No one except Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni, we imagine. The *Iron Man* director (and voice of Mandalorian Pre Vizsla on *The Clone Wars*) serves as showrunner and writer after pitching the idea of a series based on his favourite characters to Kathleen Kennedy. Filoni, meanwhile, has written an episode, and is making his live-action directorial debut on the show.

The pair were in attendance for the *Mandalorian* panel at Star Wars Celebration where, for the first time, fans in attendance got a glimpse of the Mandalorian in action. Set five years after *Return Of The Jedi*, among “the smugglers and the underworld, the scum and villainy”, the fall of the Empire and collapse of their iron rule on the galaxy has led to lawless chaos. Incorporating elements from the “original trilogy, the prequels, the sequels, the Clone Wars”, *The Mandalorian* will also “pull stuff in from Legends”, and reestablish them as canon.

Footage shown at Celebration opened with a shot of the Mandalorian’s iconic silhouette against the backdrop of an icy planet. Following a tracking beacon down a long walkway, he arrives at a cantina before stepping through a spiral doorway. In behind-the-scenes footage, Favreau explained how the series was an opportunity to introduce new “planets, species, races and starships”, against concept art of space stations, a sandcrawler (could a trip to Tatooine

be on the cards?) and the Mandalorian riding a Dewback, echoing Boba Fett in the *Holiday Special*.

Favreau went on to describe how the cutting-edge tech he’s using on *The Lion King* (which he’s making simultaneously) came in handy on *The Mandalorian*, but that “at its core [*Star Wars*] needs to feel handmade.” To prove his point, Favreau introduced footage demonstrating how the Mandalorian’s ship, the Razorcrest, was realised by creating a scale miniature using traditional model-making techniques. The Razorcrest is no Slave I with a fresh paint job, either. Described as a “reflective silver old army surplus gunship”, it looks more like a Republic dropship used in the Clone Wars than Fett’s iconic vessel. We also learned that for the first time, the 501st Legion will appear on screen as Stormtroopers. The fan organisation known for their screen-accurate costumes were called in when Filoni found himself short a Stormtrooper or 10 while shooting the pilot. “A lot of the costumes you guys make are better than what was used on screen at certain points,” laughed Filoni.

The panel ended with more Celebration-exclusive footage, starting with a single extended sequence setting up the Mandalorian’s mission in the show. Sitting at a table in a cantina, the ‘Mando’ (as he’s colloquially called) is joined by bounty hunter boss Greef (*Predator*’s Carl Weathers), who’s discussing ‘bail jumpers’. “I’ll take them all,” says the Mando, but Greef doesn’t have enough jobs to go around, and the highest-paying target won’t even cover the Mando’s fuel. But “There is one job,” says Greef. It’s for a dangerous underworld figure, but the Mando doesn’t hesitate when he’s offered the credit chit.

Stepping outside, where Salacious Crumb (or one of his distant cousins, we hope) is being spit-roasted in a →

MASK



Carl Weathers
as bounty
hunter
boss Greef.

The Mandalorian
tangles with rival
merc Cara Dune
(Gina Carano).



marketplace, the Mando walks through a busy bazaar and some dusty streets before knocking on an inauspicious door. An eye on a stalk, much like the one at Jabba's palace in *Return Of The Jedi*, pops out, before giving the Mando the all-clear. A Gonk droid leads him down a corridor to another door, which opens to reveal four Stormtroopers.

The Stormtroopers are there to protect their employer, played by legendary filmmaker/nihilist Werner Herzog. "Greef Carga said you were the best in the parsec," says Herzog. Right then, another character walks in from a side door, and the Mando has two guns trained on him before the Stormtroopers can react. "We have you four to one," says a 'trooper. "I like those odds," the Mando deadpans back. They lower their guns. It's a doctor, dressed in a white uniform that resembles Krennic's in *Rogue One*. It seems Herzog wants the Mando to retrieve a living specimen, one he's happy to have returned alive or dead, the latter possibility horrifying the doctor. Herzog has a significant quantity of beskar to offer the Mando as payment. Otherwise known as Mandalorian iron, beskar is an alloy used in Mandalorian armour that is strong enough to resist a direct blaster shot, or even the slash of a lightsaber. "It's good to restore natural order after a period of disarray," says Herzog as the Mando strides away.

After this, more footage – cut like a trailer – plays, featuring brief glimpses of the Razorcrest flying through space, and a scuffle between the Mando and Cara Dune (Gina Carano) ending with the two of them pointing guns at each other in stalemate, Giancarlo Esposito in a black suit commanding a Flametrooper to "burn them out", IG-11 shooting twin pistols, a TIE Fighter, the Mando taking out Stormtroopers in a variety of cool, creative ways, and, finally, wielding Boba Fett's Holiday Special rifle in a callback we're absolutely here for. What impresses most is how well the footage revealed so far holds up compared to most *Star Wars* films – you'd be hard pressed to tell it was made for TV. Watch your back, Boba.

FINAL DESTINATION

AFTER 42 YEARS IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, THE SKYWALKER SAGA IS COMING TO AN END. JORDAN FARLEY WITNESSED THE RISE OF SKYWALKER AT STAR WARS CELEBRATION 2019

THIS MOVIE, IT'S ABOUT THIS new generation: what they've inherited, the light, and the dark. And asking the question as they face the greatest evil: 'are they prepared? Are they ready?'" JJ Abrams dropped this tantalising info nugget in the first five minutes of the *Episode IX* panel at Star Wars Celebration in Chicago. Little did the 2,000 people in attendance know that 90 minutes later, the galaxy's 'greatest evil' would be on everyone's lips.

For Emperor Palpatine is back in *Episode IX*. Or, as everyone discovered mere moments after a familiar cackle sent shivers down collective spines, he's back in *The Rise Of Skywalker*. The how and why is still a mystery (though we have some theories which you can read on p38), but Palpatine's return is revealing. Where *The Last Jedi* director Rian Johnson seemed to share the philosophy of this new trilogy's antagonist Kylo Ren – to "let the past die. Kill it, if you have to" – Abrams can't resist embracing *Star Wars* history wholeheartedly.

If the ecstatic reception the film's first trailer received from the Galaxy Stage audience is anything to go by, it would seem that fans are yearning to feel those comfortingly familiar original trilogy warm and fuzzies too. As impressive and vitally forward-looking as *The Last Jedi* was, Luke moping round an island and supping on sea-cow milk didn't inspire the same nostalgic glow as the sight of Han Solo and Chewie stepping onto the Millennium Falcon for the first time in 30 years. When it comes to *Star Wars*, Abrams knows how to give the lifelong die hards what they want.

Luke will still be present in *The Rise Of Skywalker*; he provides enigmatic narration for the film's trailer, so it's a safe bet he'll appear in Force ghost form (unless his full-colour Force projection powers extend to the spectral realm). Miraculously, Carrie Fisher will appear too. Instead of an all-CG Leia, which was never an option, Abrams is creating new scenes by writing around deleted footage shot for *The Force Awakens*. And Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams) is making his sequel trilogy debut, happy to be back in the cockpit of



The Death Star: a boon for local tourism.



Lando was delighted that his old cape still fit.



They were hoping Threepio had got lost on the way.



BB-8 and new droid buddy/future must-have Christmas present, D-O.

the Falcon for the trailer. If rumours are to be believed, Lando may have a paternal relationship to Naomi Ackie's new addition, Jannah. "Lando is a very charming man," Ackie teased. "So he could have children all over the universe, that's all I'm saying!" She has a point.

But with most major original trilogy characters now out of the picture, *The Rise Of Skywalker* has to be primarily about the new generation. With Abrams famously fond of keeping the lid of the mystery box shut, solid plot details were unsurprisingly thin on the ground. But we do know that there will be a more traditional time jump before the action picks up again, and that *The Rise Of Skywalker* "is an adventure that the group goes on together." Abrams teased that we'll see Rey do "some extraordinary things" in the film, which may include new Force powers. John Boyega revealed that Finn "has found his footing and his identity within the Resistance". Poe is getting a fetching new scarf, and BB-8 has a brand new droid pal, D-O, who looks like a cross between a duck and a megaphone.

Kelly Marie Tran's Rose Tico will also return. Tran was hounded off social media by so-called fans in the wake of *The Last Jedi*'s release, but in a heart-warming show of support got the biggest cheer of the panel. Until the trailer, that is...

UNCLEAR, THE FUTURE IS

Running at 134 seconds, *The Rise Of Skywalker* teaser gives us plenty of hints about what to expect from the final entry in the Skywalker saga. And again, Abrams seems to be taking a step back from some of Johnson's bolder decision in *The Last Jedi* – literally piecing Kylo Ren's shattered mask back together and (somehow) putting Luke's obliterated lightsaber back in Rey's hands. But the best is saved for last, as Rey, Finn, Poe, Threepio and BB-8 (but not R2, hmm) approach the remains of the Death Star. When the teaser ended, revealing the film's title for the first time, Palpatine actor Ian McDiarmid appeared on stage to growl "roll it again". Talk about a mic drop.

The return of the Emperor – whatever form that might take – is no cynical attempt to appeal to fans. As explained by Lucasfilm overlord Kathleen Kennedy, *The Rise Of Skywalker* isn't just the final chapter in this current sequel trilogy, but "the third act of a three-act structure," and that Abrams and writer Chris Terrio have "immersed themselves in everything George [Lucas] created." What better way to bring the Skywalker saga to a close than going back to where it all began?



Ahsoka Tano will return in the resurrected *Clone Wars* series.



TECHNICALLY, WE'VE KNOWN HOW THE CLONE WARS ends for years – y'know, the Republic turns into the Empire, Anakin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader, and Order 66 wipes out the Jedi. But the end of *The Clone Wars* – the animated series set during the long-running skirmish between Republic and Separatist forces – remains something of a mystery, seeing as the show was cancelled in 2013 following

Disney's Lucasfilm buyout.

We'll soon be getting closure, however, as the much-loved series is getting an unlikely reprieve via 12 new episodes on soon-to-launch streaming service Disney+. Longstanding showrunner Dave Filoni (also a veteran of *Star Wars: Rebels*) is back at the helm to pick up stories that have been gestating for years – including the Siege of Mandalore, a critical skirmish that takes place in the last days of the Clone Wars.

"[The siege] is a big deal," Filoni told the *Clone Wars* panel at Star Wars Celebration. "It's the story I've thought most about probably over the last decade. Some things that exist in the story are things that George [Lucas] and I discussed before he sold the company and we moved on, so it's been very important to me to keep the DNA of what we were doing alive."

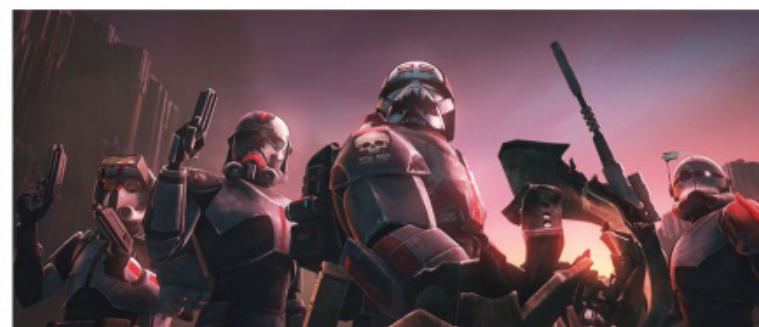
The new episodes will also pick up the story of Anakin Skywalker's Padawan Ahsoka Tano, who left the Jedi Order in apparent disgrace at the end of season five. When we catch up with her she's disillusioned and hanging out in the wretched hive of scum and villainy that is level 1313, deep in Coruscant's underbelly.

"The big question was, 'How does this person who was raised in this [Jedi] temple react to everyday life?'" said Filoni. "What does it mean now she's on the outside? How does she rectify who she was trained and raised to be with leaving the Jedi order and feeling somewhat betrayed by them. So I came up with this story that was relevant to who she was, who she could potentially become and who she really needs to be."

However the Clone Wars ultimately conclude, we know that Ahsoka will survive Order 66 and live to fight another day in *Star Wars: Rebels*. But before she gets there, she will have another duel with the reincarnated Darth Maul – a fight that used an actual Sith Lord as a consultant.

"I wanted this to be an epic lightsaber fight," Filoni revealed. "We haven't done too many of those in *The Clone Wars* over the years, so this one I felt had to be among the best, if not *the* best. The best way to have a really great lightsaber fight is to go talk to somebody who has done lightsaber fighting, so I said to Ray [Park, the actor and martial arts star who played Maul in *The Phantom Menace*], 'Why don't we just suit you up in a mo-cap suit and have you be Darth Maul again? So when you see Maul fighting, it's really going to be Maul fighting.' There's just something unique about the way Ray moves, it's a skill, it's an art, it's truly him." Not bad for a guy Obi-Wan Kenobi sliced in two...

The Clone Wars will stream on Disney+ in the US, date TBC.



Expect some new surprises for fans.

KEEPING UP WITH THE CLONES

RETURNED, THE CLONE WARS HAS

WORDS: RICHARD EDWARDS

PALPATINE'S BACK IN THE RISE OF SKYWALKER, BUT HOW? WE'VE GONE UNDERCOVER AMONG THE SITH TO INVESTIGATE. MANY SAM ASHURSTS DIED TO BRING US THIS INFORMATION

PALPATINE'S A CLONE

The first post-*Jedi* appearance of the Emperor came in *Dark Empire*, a comic taking place in the now defunct Expanded Universe (or Legends). There, the evil Emperor used a mixture of science and magic (otherwise known as cloning technology and an 'essence transfer ritual') to put his nasty spirit into a cloned body. Obviously, EU lore has been wiped out of the new canon, but clones do still exist, and it would be a nice full circle to bring them back into the main film franchise. Also, if Matt Smith does appear in *The Rise Of Skywalker* as rumoured, could he be playing a young Palpatine?

FORCE VISION/HOLOGRAM

There's a good chance we're only getting a technical return of the Emperor through the medium of a Force vision or a hologram. You might not realise it, but the Emperor actually appeared in *The Force Awakens* - he can be heard in Rey's Force vision. So it would be logical for the same to happen in *Episode IX*. Alternatively, Palpatine ruddy loves appearing as a hologram - it's how we saw him in *The Empire Strikes Back*, so he could appear in *Rise* as a weird pre-recorded message, which would be a bit disappointing.

HE NEVER DIED

This might seem madder than Darth Vader yelling 'Noooo!' but there's a strand of the fandom that believes Palpatine used his Darth Plagueis skills to resurrect himself. Plagueis found a way to defeat death, and some fans believe Palpatine did the same, with enough remnants surviving his trip to the bottom of a space shaft in *Return Of The Jedi* to allow him to (eventually) resurrect himself using the Force. Of course, he'd have to survive a mile-long drop, radiation from the reactor, and the small matter of the MASSIVE EXPLOSION that destroyed the Death Star to do it, but stranger things have happened.

PALPATINE IS REY'S DAD - SORT OF

It's heavily implied that Palpatine manipulated midichlorians to create Anakin Skywalker in the prequel trilogy. Some fans believe he did the same thing to create Rey. We're not sure why - Anakin was the child of a nobody working a menial job on a desert planet who transcended her lowly existence to conceive a super-powerful Jedi-level child for no apparent reason. Meanwhile, Rey was the child of two nobodies, working as junk traders on a desert planet who transcended their lowly existence to conceive a super-powerful Jedi-level child for no apparent reason... Hang on a parsec, these theorists could be onto something! Could Rey's increasing Force strength be linked to Palpatine returning?

PALPATINE'S SPIRIT IS POSSESSING THE DEATH STAR

By far the most bonkers theory is also our favourite. In Chuck Wendig's *Aftermath*, it's revealed the Sith can be resurrected using artefacts that meant something to them. There are few relics that mean more to Palpatine than the Death Star; it was his greatest weapon and the place where he died. Could he have bonded to the Death Star remains, haunting its corridors, requiring Rey to travel there to defeat him? That could explain why the first teaser trailer sees Rey and her pals rocking up to the planet-sized laser. Is a cross between the Emperor and Unicron too much to ask?

THE EMPEROR'S NEW GROOVE

1 9 4 4  2 0 1 9

PETER MAYHEW

REMEMBERING THE LATE STAR WARS ICON

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD

WHEN *STAR WARS* ERUPTED in 1977, it gave a shot of fame to everyone – not just the billboard-friendly faces but the unseen troupers too, the talent encased in gold plating or masked by the black visage of a Sith Lord. Anthony Daniels. Dave Prowse. Kenny Baker. Their modestly British names were enshrined on the backs of bubblegum cards and breathless pages in *Star Wars Weekly*, as synonymous with that galaxy far, far away as the topline players.

“The big chance came, and so I took it,” remembered the late Peter Mayhew, who brought rangy, soulful life to Chewbacca, Han Solo’s Wookiee sidekick. “*Star Wars* was such a unique opportunity that I couldn’t refuse. It’s an opportunity that only strikes once, so you might as well make the most of it.”

At 7’ 3”, Mayhew’s towering height – the result of an overactive pituitary gland – was the key to that life-defining break. His stature gave him everyday problems (“Telephone booths are sheer murder, the receiver seems like it’s down around my knees!”), but it caught the attention of a newspaper looking for the biggest feet in Britain. Those size 16s earned a first taste of fame for a man quietly but happily working as a porter at King’s College Hospital.

Mayhew’s picture was seen by Charles H Schneer, producer of Ray Harryhausen’s Dynamation epics. Schneer cast him as the bronze, bull-headed Minotaur in *Sinbad And The Eye Of The Tiger*. The role went uncredited but it led directly to *Star Wars*. “They’re looking for someone big,” Mayhew was told, as he always was. At Elstree he saw concept art of two potential parts, equally oversized. “And I thought, ‘Darth Vader – no. Chewbacca – yes.’ I looked at the character and said, ‘I can do something with that. That has possibilities.’”

Mayhew waited in George Lucas’s office, parking his skyscraping frame on the sofa. “He and [producer] Gary Kurtz walked in. I did the natural thing. I stood up. Basically, that was the interview. He turned to Gary and said, ‘I think we’ve found him.’”

“He was perfect,” Lucas later recalled. “When Peter put on that costume, he instantly became the embodiment of the character.”

Mayhew took himself to the zoo, after being cast, to study primates and bears, looking for physical cues. It was the actor’s own physicality, however, that made Chewbacca so much more than simply a shambling cosmic Bigfoot. Wordless, the character came alive on screen, whether crabby, tickled or skittish, heartbroken at a friend’s fate or smugly winning at holographic chess. Above all it was Mayhew’s eyes – bright but melancholy – that held the spirit of a 200-year-old Wookiee warrior.



Mayhew with make-up artist Stuart Freeborn.



An off-duty Chewie towers over the crew.

“Much of my personality has gone into Chewie, and people can pick those bits out,” he said. “There are quirky movements that nobody else does. I feel that I’ve put a great deal of Peter Mayhew into Chewbacca.”

Mayhew wore the shaggy yak-hair suit across the original trilogy and made guest-shots as Chewie in everything from *The Muppet Show* to *Donny And Marie*. Frustrated by a lack of acting offers after *Return Of The Jedi*, he set up a furniture-making business in Yorkshire then joined the Sharpie-wielding *Star Wars* convention circuit, where he met his future wife, Angie.

George Lucas recalled him to Kashyyyk in 2005’s *Revenge Of The Sith*. A decade later Mayhew was reunited with original co-star Harrison Ford in *The Force Awakens*, although a double knee replacement surgery in 2013 – a consequence of age and height – had left him incapacitated as a physical performer.

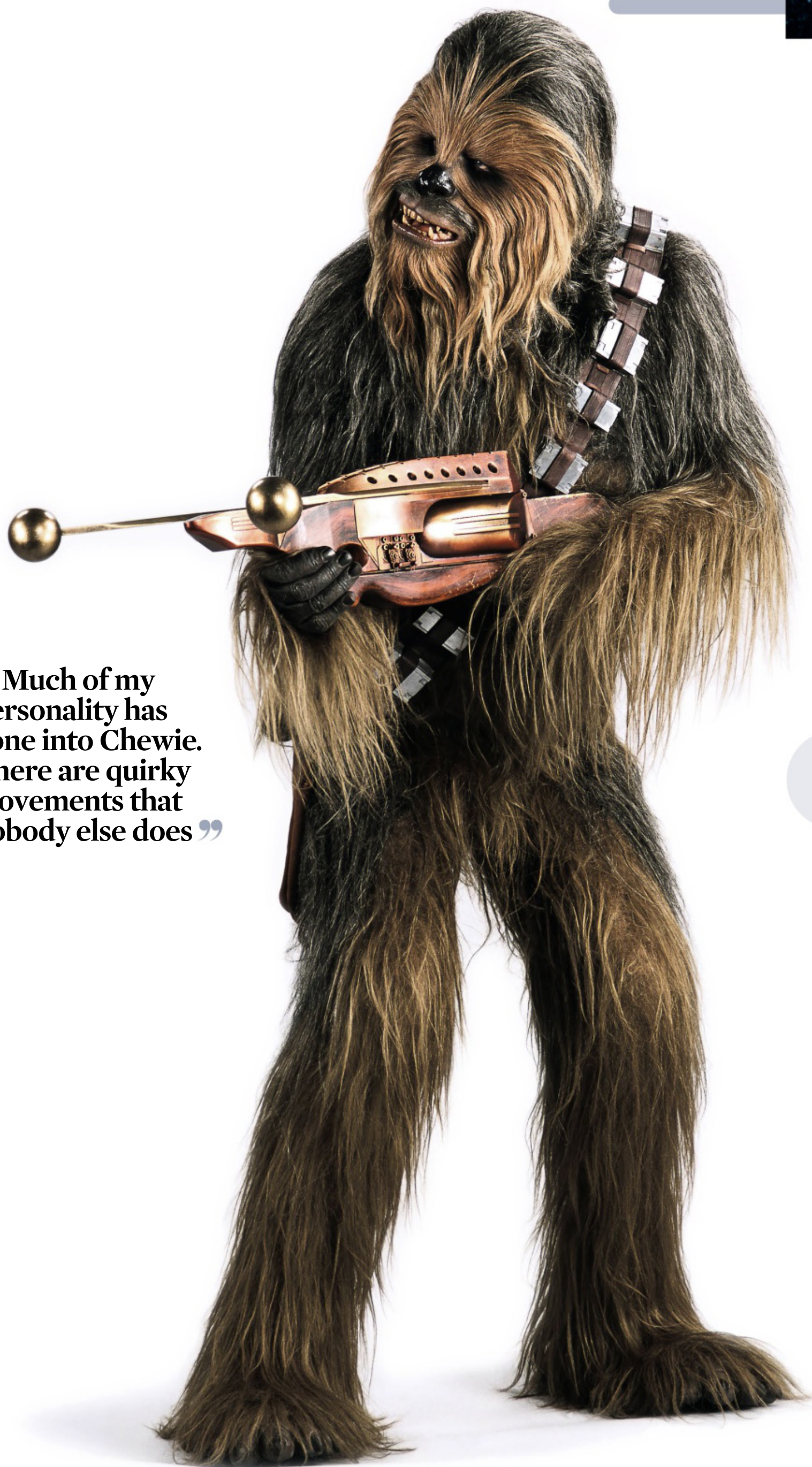
As he remembered telling incoming director JJ Abrams, “I laid my cards on the counter. I said, ‘Look, I can’t walk. I can do most things, but the only thing I can’t really do is walk. But I can do the facial expressions and everything else like that for Chewie.’ And he said, ‘Right, we’ll find out what you have to do and we’ll get it done.’”

It would be Mayhew’s final performance as Chewbacca. With 2017’s *The Last Jedi*, the role was inherited by Joonas Suotamo, who had body-doubled him on *The Force Awakens*.

Peter Mayhew died on 30 April in Boyd, Texas, aged 74. In a statement, Harrison Ford remembered him as “a kind and gentle man, possessed of great dignity and noble character”. Mark Hamill added, “He was the gentlest of giants. A big man with an even bigger heart who never failed to make me smile and a loyal friend who I loved dearly.”

George Lucas paid tribute too, to the man who had so brilliantly personified a piece of his imagination – and won so much love from the world in doing so. “He was the closest any human being could be to a Wookiee: big heart, gentle nature – and I learned to always let him win.” ●

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“Much of my personality has gone into Chewie. There are quirky movements that nobody else does”

NOT ANOTHER JEAN MOVIE

FOR FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR SIMON KINBERG IT'S A SECOND STAB AT THE **DARK PHOENIX** SAGA. AS DAVE GOLDER LEARNS, HE'S PROMISING A DARKER, MORE INTENSE, MORE COSMIC EXPERIENCE FOR THE X-MEN'S LAST STAND AT FOX

EVEN IN A CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE WHERE superhero movies regularly retell the same origin stories over and over (here's looking at you, Spidey) audiences may have an uncanny sense of déjà vu with *Dark Phoenix*. Hang on, hasn't this franchise done this story already? Well, yeah, back in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006). But there are two good reasons why this all makes sense. First, the *X-Men* cinematic universe was rebooted into a parallel time in *Days Of Future Past* (2014). Secondly, and far more importantly to *Dark Phoenix* director Simon Kinberg, "I don't think we actually did the Dark Phoenix story in *The Last Stand*."

In this regard he's in tune with fans. The Dark Phoenix saga in the comics chronicled Jean Grey/Marvel Girl's transformation into the mind-bogglingly powerful and evil Dark Phoenix (because if power corrupts then cosmic power corrupts cosmically) over 38 issues. *The Last Stand* reduced all that to a B-plot.

"It was backgrounded to the main storyline in a dual plot," says Kinberg. "It really didn't feel like it was fully mined or fully explored in that movie. I wanted to make sure that the Dark Phoenix plot was not only the primary

plot of the movie, but the *only* plot of the movie. The challenge is how to boil that down to a two-hour movie.

"I really wanted to make it just Jean and her struggle with this cosmic entity taking her over. To follow how that struggle emotionally, psychologically and supernaturally manifests for Jean personally, and for the people around her, the X-Men."

The difference between these two versions of the saga is, he says, "similar to *Deadpool* in *X-Men Origins* versus *Deadpool* in *Deadpool*".

He also happily admits there are parallels to *Captain America: Civil War*.

"I love *Civil War*, it's one of my favourite MCU movies. What I loved about it was friend turns against friend – something very personal splits them down the middle. That's true of this movie. What you see is a Jean who's cracked up. Jean losing control. Jean becoming destructive. So there are people in her immediate circle – the X-Men, Magneto as well – who believe she can be saved and people who believe she should be stopped and killed. Friends become enemies and enemies become friends. That schism widens throughout the film." →



KEEP YOUR COMPOSER

How *Dark Phoenix* convinced celebrated maestro Han Zimmer to come out of superhero retirement



Back in 2016, after scoring the *Dark Knight* trilogy, *Man of Steel* and *Batman Vs Superman: Dawn Of Justice*, Hans Zimmer told the BBC, “I have officially retired from the superhero business,” suggesting that *BvS* “was very hard for me to do, to try to find new language”.

So it's a pleasant surprise to see Zimmer's name in the credits for *Dark Phoenix*. How did Kinberg entice him back?



“A few ways. One was by begging – that sometimes works. He’s a hero of mine. I’ve been writing my screenplays to his scores for years now,” says Kinberg. “I just started stalking him via email. Finally he came to Montreal, where *Dark Phoenix* was shot, to do a concert and I at least got him to agree to come and meet me and talk about the movie. When he heard the intentions for the movie – more dramatic, more emotional, more human – he got excited because he thought it would be different from some of the superhero movies he’d worked on in the past. Certainly the most recent ones.

“I showed him the script, that got him excited too. He saw it as a new challenge. That’s everything he wants – a new challenge every time.

“I think he composed around 11 or 12 hours of music for this film. Then we whittled it down to the two hours for the movie. He writes these big, sweeping suites, where they aren’t really written for particular scenes. They’re sometimes written for specific characters, or emotions, or ideas. From that you start to carve it into where certain bits fit in with certain scenes, and then he eventually performs them to the actual scenes.”

© GETTY (1)



The Blue Man Group’s new recruit was under arrest.



“Dude, you need to be more careful shaving.”



The easyJet flight to Ibiza got a little bumpy.

While this is Kinberg’s first movie as director he’s been involved with Fox’s *X-Men* franchise since a pre-MCU Kevin Feige and Avi Arad invited him to help script *The Last Stand*. He’s worked as a co-writer or producer on every X-film since, plus *Logan* and the *Deadpools*. An X-Men fan since he was a kid, he relishes the chance to tell an X-Men tale in his own style.

“I wanted to bring a dirtier, grittier vibe. The *X-Men* films are almost 20 years old and I think

“I wanted to bring a dirtier, grittier vibe... I wanted to make this movie feel more like it lived in the real world”

the films have been very stylised. It’s been operatic. It hasn’t really lived in our world. I wanted to make this movie feel more like it lived in the real world.”

He sees the approach as a direct reaction against the film that immediately preceded it, the last X-movie helmed by Bryan Singer before he departed from the franchise. “I felt what we did with *Apocalypse*, it got a little bit away from character-led storytelling. I really

wanted to get it back to being grounded in [as much] human emotion as possible.” He’s also not ignoring the cosmic element of the saga. *The Last Stand* did, implying that Jean simply turned evil as a result of some latent power within herself.

“It was also important to me that we got into the cosmic storyline,” says Kinberg. “What was happening to Jean wasn’t just psychological, it was the Phoenix force – an intergalactic cosmic entity. Those were things that were never explored – that kind of scale, that kind of intergalactic element – in an *X-Men* movie before.”

Just as Kinberg has finally got his hands on the keys of the X-universe, though, it has been snatched away from him by the Disney/Fox merger, which means that at some hazy point in the distant future the X-Men will be integrated with the MCU. That means *Dark Phoenix* is the final Fox X-movie, and while Kinberg didn’t know this would be the case when he started the film, he says it still makes a fitting finale.

“When we started working on the script we weren’t looking at it as the last one, but we were looking at it as the culmination of this cycle of *X-Men* movies. If *X-Men: First Class* began the cycle with a bunch of strangers coming together as a family, as a team, this was

SHADES OF GREY

Chris Claremont on Jean Grey's evolution from Marvel Girl to Phoenix

a movie about that family and team breaking apart and then ultimately coming back together as a result. It felt like a natural end."

The trailers did cause some controversy when they revealed Phoenix killing Mystique. This event seems to replace Phoenix destroying a planet in the comics, in an attempt to make the pivotal moment where Jean truly oversteps the mark more personal. But wasn't this a major spoiler? "Part of the reason that that was in the trailer was to indicate to people that this was a bold, different kind of *X-Men* movie where you don't just emerge from a fallen building and dust yourself off. Anybody and everybody is at risk."

But people have died in *X-Men* movies before. "Logan notwithstanding, in the main *X-Men* movie even the characters that die resurrect in the post credit scenes," he perseveres. "Major characters don't die. This is a different kind of *X-Men* movie. The trailer wanted to declare that."

Another element of previous films he's playing down is the period setting. The last four *X*-movies have jumped from the '60s to the '70s to the '80s and now the '90s, but you might not notice this time around.

"I didn't really go hard at the '90s angle. Unlike the previous decades, it's not so different-looking in terms of the clothes and cars and things from now – other than the lack of mobiles. I felt like we had started fetishising the periods, and spending too much time on that. So without doing anything that was anachronistic I didn't make a big deal of people wearing Nirvana shirts."

DARK INSPIRATION

But what of the mysterious alien character being played by Jessica Chastain, seen guiding the newly empowered Jean in the trailers. Is she, as some fans suspect, a twisted version of Professor X's love interest Lilandra from the comics? Kinberg is circumspect.

"I will tell you this: her character is inspired by a few different characters from the Dark Phoenix saga. To do the full Lilandra plot, her relationship with Charles, would start to pull the movie away from Jean. And I really, really, really wanted to keep focussed on Jean. So there are elements of various characters that the fans will recognise in terms of derivation and motivation." Along this line, Kinberg also teases, "There's one little cameo that hardcore fans will, I think, get a kick out of on the *X-Men* side. It's only very brief."

So what's next for the *X-Men* franchise now it's Disney's plaything? "I really have no idea," says Kinberg, but he admits he'd love to get another phone call from Kevin Feige like the one he got all those years ago. ●

X-Men: Dark Phoenix opens in UK cinemas on 5 June.



First falling in love with Jean Grey after seeing some artwork by artist Neal Adams when he started work as a gofer at Marvel in 1969, Chris Claremont was determined to update the erstwhile Marvel Girl when he took over from Len Wein as writer of the *All-New, All-Different X-Men* with 1975's #96.

"Neal Adams is an exceptional artist and storyteller, and his Jean Grey was like the ultimate redhead girlfriend," laughs Claremont, who was initially paired with artist Dave Cockrum before John Byrne assumed penciling duties with #108. "Comics were vastly different conceptually back then than they are today. Each team had its girl and the *X-Men*'s was Marvel Girl. The way that Dave Cockrum was drawing her was consistent with how she'd been presented up to that point, as she dressed like a respectable Upper East Side Manhattan posh lady. But that was not the direction we wanted to go in, so we revamped her, which in '70s terms meant that we gave her hot pants and a really cool haircut."

Clearing the stage for new members like Nightcrawler, Storm and Wolverine, Wein concluded #94 to #95's opening two-parter with



Jean departing alongside the rest of the original team. However, Claremont resolved to bring her back as soon as possible, reintroducing her in #98 before she's dramatically possessed by cosmic entity the Phoenix Force two issues later.

"Dave and I wanted her to stand on equal terms with the other five members of the team, so were working on giving her a new and unique identity, which was not pejorative and not just a girl," explains Claremont. "In one of the best conceptual designs of that era, Dave came up with her green and gold costume. At the same time, every writer has their list of cool superhero names and mine was Phoenix, which was perfect for Jean as she was rising from the ashes of #100."

With Claremont noting that "for every yin, there is a yang", Jean began her transformation into Dark Phoenix in #129 after falling under the malign influence of Mastermind. "He had no idea what he was dealing with, as it was like juggling with a nuclear bomb," reasons Claremont. "As far as Mastermind was concerned, 'I'm a badass and she's a girl so I can handle this. I mean, what kind of danger is a girl?'"

Initially intending her to survive the Dark Phoenix saga, it was editor-in-chief Jim Shooter who insisted that Jean must make the ultimate sacrifice by dying in 1980's classic #137. "It was a totally last-minute decision, as after Jim saw Jean supernova a sun in #135 just because she was hungry, killing about six billion people in the process, he said that all the traditional bets are now off and there has to be some moral consequence for this unforgivable act," recalls Claremont. "I took that as a green light to say 'she's committed this terrible crime so to stay true to herself and bring the story to a viable end, she has to pay for it with her life.'" **Stephen Jewell**

SOUL

IT'S A BIG YEAR FOR JOE HILL ADAPTATIONS. He's already hot property thanks to his library of fantasy and horror novels, comics and short stories (not to mention a movie version of his 2010 novel *Horns*, starring Daniel Radcliffe), but Stephen King's lad is about to go mainstream. Not only is *In The Tall Grass* coming to the big screen and *Locke & Key* to Netflix (after several aborted attempts), his vampire novel *NOS4A2* is coming to TV.

Inspired by Hill's third novel, *NOS4A2* (*NOS4R2* in the UK, because Brits pronounce Nosferatu differently) the series spins the vampire metaphor away from blood-sucking to soul-sucking. Charlie Manx (Zachary Quinto) is a 135-year-old creature who steals children so he can siphon their souls into his being to turn back the hands of time. He then spirits his abductees away to a supernatural place called Christmasland. It's only when a young woman named Vic McQueen (Ashleigh Cummings) discovers she has supernatural powers that allow her to track Manx that the stage is set for a terrifying game of cat and mouse.

Showrunner Jami O'Brien was already a *Locke & Key* fan when she read Hill's vampire book, and *NOS4A2* instantly grabbed her as well. "I remember reading a blurb on the back of the jacket that said, 'Vic McQueen is the only person to ever survive an encounter with Charlie Manx,'" she tells *SFX*. "I was like, 'That's awesome!'"

She immediately wanted to see the young woman who bests a monster, despite having her own deep insecurities about her place in the world. "Initially, it was that family drama that pulled me in," O'Brien adds. "But I think that the supernatural elements of the book are so unique and complicated in a really wonderful way too."

In figuring out how to parcel the book's narrative into a 10-hour first season, O'Brien says the novel gave her

AS **NOS4A2**, JOE HILL'S NOVEL TWIST ON VAMPIRES, COMES TO TV, TARA BENNETT FINDS OUT WHY WE SHOULD BE SCARED OF CHARLIE MANX...

clear guidelines to follow. "If you're familiar with the book, there's an event about a third of the way through that just feels like the end of a season," she teases. "So, we started there and worked our way back from there [for the series]."

O'Brien also made the big decision to age-up Vic from eight in the book to age 18 in the show. "For me, the show is really a coming of age story, in both the real world, and what we call the world of thought, which is Manx's world. In the real world, Vic's asking how do I fit in a town that's a pretty hard scrabble place that isn't always super kind to empathetic, creative individuals? Then, in the supernatural world, she's grappling with, what does it mean that I have this gift? How do I take on evil, for lack of a better term? There's a responsibility there, literally, to save the souls of children." →





She regretted having that ninth pint the night before.

Finding the right actress to embody that was tough, but O'Brien says Cummings had the perfect alchemy. "When Ashleigh came in, she knocked our socks off by saying to us, 'Here is my beating heart. Don't mess with me.' She just has this incredible empathy and vulnerability, and courage, and strength. There was no question she could eventually go toe-to-toe with what Zachary Quinto would bring."

MONSTER MANX

Which brings it back to Charlie Manx. As played by *Heroes* and *Star Trek* star Quinto, the show's antagonist transforms through stages from withered old man to someone younger and more robust. All the while, he remains a convincing pied piper. O'Brien says she and Quinto were always adamant that Manx not devolve into an easy monster, so his story isn't one note. "Zach has been really rigorous in terms of what that physicality is. In the most extreme make-up looks that he has, in his most extreme physicality, what we really tried to do is ground that in ageing. Whenever we see him in a different age, we try ask what is this age, and what are the physical characteristics of this age?"

"One of the things that's amazing about watching Zach's performance is every time you see him, he's different," she continues. "He really transforms. There's such focus and specificity to how he does that. I just think it's awesome."

That's not to say that the character, and what he does, isn't horrifying. O'Brien says she spent a lot of time finding the right tone in portraying the horror of Manx's actions, especially because he victimises children. "What's interesting about the book, and what we've

“A lot of things are implied... we're striving to keep people on the edge of their seat without being super bloody”

really tried to embrace, is that it's hard – and what I'm going to say sounds a little contradictory because you could argue that draining someone's soul is an act of violence – but, if you put that aside for a moment, there really isn't any violence towards children on the show at all. You never see Charlie Manx raise a hand to a child."

"Instead," she continues, "what you see is their soul being drained away. I think there's something that's fun about that, as opposed to gory. It's also unsettling. And that's really what we've gone for because the show doesn't have a lot of 'jump' scares in it. It doesn't have a lot of gore in it. It doesn't have a lot of on-screen violence in it. A lot of things are implied. Really what [the writers] talk about a lot is suspense, tension and dread. What's going to happen?

CUMMINGS TO AMERICA

Young Aussie star Ashleigh Cummings talks Vic McQueen



Vic calls herself a "townie" and there's an exploration of classism influencing the story, as she's a working class artist. How did that impact your understanding of her?
In terms of the class struggle, that was something Jami [O'Brien, showrunner] really brought to the show and deepened that groove that Joe Hill had explored in the book. It really served as a metaphor for me, regarding Vic's feeling of isolation and entrapment and inability to escape both the world that she lives in, and also her own mental processing.

Within the horror elements of the series, what really got to you?
Manx's eyes. It was terrifying. The first time I came up close to Zach in his make-up, he was completely transformed. There's a line where I'm talking about looking into the eyes of evil and I felt like I was both looking into the eyes of evil and looking into the eyes of a child.

What did you discover about yourself doing this show?
It's still a developing question, I think. I always came from a place of empathy first, and I didn't know how to attribute blame towards people for what they did. And through Vic, I actually feel like I internalised a little more strength and accountability towards people, while holding onto that empathy. We deal with these ideas of "good" and "evil" and the show talks about how people aren't just one or the other, they can be both. That's a really important message to put out into the world.



Zachary Quinto uses prosthetics to play evil Charlie Manx at various ages.



ZACH IN TIME

**Zachary Quinto on
creating a villain
for the ages**



Charlie Manx goes through a dramatic progression with prosthetics. Were you prepared for such an exhausting process?

I've really been open to and interested in the idea of an opportunity that would allow me to immerse myself in a character, and transform in a way so that was something that I haven't actively pursued. That was obviously an aspect of this experience that was really appealing. One of the first things I said to Jami and all the producers was I really feel like one of the only ways that we can accomplish this is if we get Joel Harlow, who is an incredibly talented special effects make-up artist. I've worked with him on the last two *Star Trek* films. I just knew that if I was going to undertake a challenge like this, that I needed to do it in the hands of someone who I could trust implicitly and someone who is really the best of the best.

What's really sinister about Manx to you?

In the world of the show, inscapes are places that are expressions of the internal lives and imaginations of these characters who are strong. So, Manx's inscape [Christmasland] is rooted in the sense of wonder and the sense of joy and childlike enthusiasm for this holiday, which is universally acquainted with presents and gifts. There's a lot about how much he relishes in that, that I think is really creepy, and the way that he appeals to the kids and brings them in, and appeals to their sensitivities and their vulnerabilities.

STOCK PHOTOS © ISTOCK VIA GETTY. PORTRAIT © COREY NICKOLS/GETTY IMAGES



His audition to be the face of Colgate did not go well.

What's around the corner? We're striving to keep people on the edge of their seat without being super bloody."

Deep into post-production on *NOS4A2*'s first season, O'Brien believes it's working. "There are moments where I'm watching this show where I'm like, 'This is amazing,' and then really, if you think about it a little bit more, it's really disturbing."

That threat also sets up Vic for quite a journey as a heroine. "I love that the show is about an 18-year-old girl. I think that's pretty

incredible," she says with pride. "She's a hero, and she's a hero who happens to be a girl. Often times, when you do see female heroes, what you see is really hardened, physically

strong super heroes. The way that Ashleigh plays the role, which I love, is really that her strength is her empathy and her creativity. You do see her riding around on a dirt bike, but you never see her doing 20 pull ups or kicking ass!"

Instead, the show is about finding her inner power to be what she aspires to in the real world, and then eventually to face off against

the monster that is Manx. "When our show is working at its best, those two stories talk to each other," O'Brien explains. "As she gets strength to confront her parents and her real world, that gives her the strength to confront Manx. Then when she has a brush with Manx, that translates into confidence in her artwork. Both things are feeding back and forth off each other, so there are personal stakes at home, and then there are really super-high world stakes in the supernatural world." ●

NOS4A2 starts airing in the US on AMC from 2 June. Its UK broadcast is still TBC.

KRYPTON



THE ZOD COMPLEX

BRYAN CAIRNS
HITCHES A RIDE
TO SUPERMAN'S
HOME PLANET
AND LEARNS ALL
IS NOT WELL IN
KRYPTON'S
SECOND SEASON...



KRYPTON IS STILL HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO.

Set two generations before Superman's home planet explodes, the TV series follows Seg-El (Cameron Cuffe) the Man of Steel's grandfather. When time traveller Adam Strange (Shaun Sipos) arrives from the future with a warning, Seg must make the toughest decision of all: prevent his world's impending doom or allow its destruction in order to ensure baby Kal-El rockets to Earth and grows into the universe's greatest champion.

The problem is, season one finale "The Phantom Zone" left the good guys out for the count. Seg managed to beat the Collector of Worlds, Brainiac (Blake Ritson), but both were whisked away to the interdimensional prison known as the Phantom Zone. Adam found

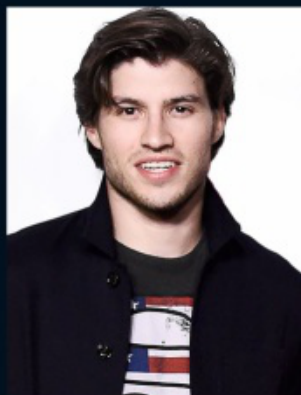
himself bottled in one of Brainiac's shrunken cities. In addition, Superman's disintegrating cape reformed with the House of Zod sigil.

To make matters worse, slumbering killing machine Doomsday finally woke up and smashed out of his containment pod. And as if all that wasn't enough to put a dampener on your day, General Zod (Colin Salmon) assumed control over the planet in Seg's absence. Life isn't looking rosy on Krypton...

"When we pick up, there's a six-month time jump and a bit of catching up to do," showrunner Cameron Welsh tells *SFX*. "Obviously, we saw Seg and Brainiac go into the Phantom Zone. We clearly pick that story up. We found Zod had taken control of Kandor City. As we enter season two, we're in Zod's world now. He's been at the helm now for six months. He's achieved a lot in that time. He's made radical, sweeping changes across Kandor. It's very much Zod's Krypton when we come back."

It falls on Seg to restore Superman's destiny and defeat Zod – if he can pull off the ultimate prison break. However, the glimpse of a bearded and exasperated Seg in the season two trailer suggests that half a year in the Phantom Zone has taken a toll on the young rogue.

"The Phantom Zone is pretty trippy," Welsh says. "It's a place that doesn't obey the normal laws of time and space.



OFF THE CUFFE

Cameron Cuffe unleashes his inner fan

You're fluent in Superman mythology. Did you have any "pinch me" moments this year?

This whole process for me is a pinch me moment. We're playing with such incredible characters, such immensely famous characters like General Zod, Brainiac and Lobo. It's the kind of thing where we were able to take real risks with these characters and take them in directions that you've never seen before. You see at the end of season one that General Zod's won. We've never seen a story where he's won. He is now the emperor of Krypton. He achieved his ultimate goal, which he has wanted forever in the comic books. Then we get to explore Brainiac in a way he's never been seen on screen. And, then we get to bring Lobo to life in live action. To be a part of that process... it's all incredible.

What other DC characters are on your wish list to appear?

We've a proud tradition of bringing characters to life in live action that haven't been there before. Adam Strange in season one, Lobo in season two... Speaking purely as a fan, it'd be awesome to see Green Lantern in there or a nod to the Green Lantern Corps or Oa. I also think it's hard to tell a story of time travel gone awry in the DC Universe without including Booster Gold. Could you imagine his chemistry with Adam Strange? The Legion would be great, too.

You can feel like you've just arrived and like you've been there forever all at the same time, which hurts your brain. In a situation like that, Brainiac and Seg are forced into an alliance. They do need to work together.

"Seg fought to save Krypton all through season one," he continues. "When he gets out of the Phantom Zone, he'll come home to a Krypton that's not as safe as when he left it. He saved it from one problem only to see it succumb to another. That's the first thing on his agenda, to make sure all the work he had done isn't wasted."

ZOD'S LAW

It would be easy to dismiss Zod as the stereotypical, power-hungry tyrant. The future son of Seg and Lyta (Georgina Campbell), Zod has established himself as one of Superman's most relentless adversaries. However, from his introduction on the show, Zod's mission was to journey to the past and alter Krypton's tragic fate. In season two Zod further twists that noble cause to serve his own ambitions.

"Zod's obsession with Krypton's survival leads him to think about protecting it in other ways," Welsh explains. "For him, that means colonisation of other territories that could potentially threaten Krypton. He is a military-minded individual, so he's thinking more in those terms. It's about building an intergalactic empire, but with Krypton being at the centre. So, his plans are domination."

To achieve that goal, Zod will attempt the unthinkable. In season one, he planned to release Doomsday and pit the rampaging monster against Brainiac, in the hope of the pair wiping each other out. Now, Zod once again intends to manipulate this creature.

"We will see Doomsday completely unleashed and see him really live up to his



"Who's turn is it to rescue that damn cat this time?"



"Why are my eyes red? It's, erm, conjunctivitis."



Things were looking grim: they were out of Jaffa Cakes.

“Krypton’s presence in the universe is no longer a secret. In expanding that world, it opens us up to wider threats”

name, which is to wreak havoc through mindless violence,” Welsh says. “If you think about Zod, he understands that Doomsday could be used as a weapon. In the show, we get to go back and see how Doomsday was created and what his purpose was. Zod – like Adam, who has knowledge of the future – has knowledge of Doomsday. For Zod, that becomes an attractive idea, to be able to possess that kind of power to advance his own interests.”

Adam must be freaking out. The time traveller materialised in the past to prevent an unknown assailant from tinkering with the timeline. So far, his mission has been an epic fail, seeing as Superman no longer exists in this alternate reality.

“That led to Earth, at some point in the future, being conquered by Zod and Adam’s hometown being bottled by Brainiac,” says Welsh. “Adam has something almost no other character has, which is knowledge of where the future is going, of what lies ahead. His only choice is to really go back and change things.”

One fresh face bound to add some carnage is intergalactic mercenary Lobo (Emmett J Scanlan). According to comic book lore, the Czarnia native slaughtered his entire race. Murder, mayhem and misery accompany Lobo wherever he goes... and now he’s landed on Krypton.

“We had loads of conversations about Lobo,” Welsh reveals. “Lobo is clearly drawn in the



PLAYING ZOD

Kneel before Colin Salmon!

How do you respond to the perception that Zod is the villain?

I think it’s more complex. People often say to me, “Are you a good guy or are you a bad guy?” I often say, “Am I a good guy who does bad things? Or am I a bad guy who does good things? I’m not sure, but, I’m just a guy.” In Zod’s mind, it’s all about protecting Krypton and saving Krypton. He has seen that future. It’s very difficult to convince people who haven’t seen that future what he’s doing is for the right reasons. His ruthlessness is because he has no time to waste. He cuts through time. He doesn’t even spare fools, let alone suffer them. I get they see him as the villain, but I would argue he’s somebody who has taken a few wrong turns. He does murder people, that’s the problem. That’s where you cross the line as a person and a character. But, to him, the greater good is the most important thing.

How will Zod be fleshed out this season?

You are going to learn more about his philosophy. You see what drives him. You’ll see him in pain. You will see him hurt. He’s not without heart, that’s for sure. He fights against it. Discovering that Seg is my father, and I am an El, sort of had this strange impact. I saw that as a weakness before. Now, I see that’s in me. Therefore, I have to come to terms with it and work that out. I use it to my advantage sometimes.

comics. Our intention was to honour the truth of that character, the way that character was originally conceived and portrayed by other creators. That was at the top of the list, to make sure he was the true Lobo. By doing that, we have a character that’s so at odds with Seg that it naturally leads to great conflict, but [is also] an opportunity for a lot of humour.”

SETTING HIGH STANDARDS

Krypton’s first year treated audiences to a variety of breathtaking sets. Production converted soundstages into living quarters, military bases, a bar, war room and, yes, even the majestic Fortress of Solitude. The design team constructed more impressive environments as the second season visits other foreign neighbourhoods and terrains.

“There are a number of new sets,” Welsh confirms. “In Zod taking power, he has rebuilt the city. We have a new set for Kandor City. He has made changes to Fort Rozz, to the military guild and to his own home. We go out on location for Colu [Brainiac’s home world]. We open the show up geographically and go to other planets. We also see Kryptonopolis.”

Fans can look forward to Seg clashing with Zod on a weekly basis. Episodes will delve into cloning and political games. Compelling character arcs and further examination of Krypton’s society will be peppered throughout the season. And, with multiple big bads creating chaos, Welsh promises the stakes have never been higher.

“Krypton’s presence in the universe, as a planet, is no longer a secret,” says Welsh. “In expanding that world, it opens us up on so many levels to wider threats beyond just what lies within Krypton’s own borders.

“But, really, it comes down to the characters. As we have a deeper understanding of who they are, that naturally comes with a sense of the stakes rising. We care about these characters. We care about their personal lives as much as the bigger plot elements happening in the show. There are a lot of human stakes we care about, that we are invested in. It gets intense.” ●

Krypton returns to Syfy in the US on 12 June.

KRYPTON PICS © 2018 SYFY MEDIA, GETTY (2)



They were both looking forward to Casual Friday.



“I just write my lines on the palms of my hands, see?”

REBEL ALLIANCE

JUNE'S ON A MISSION TO TAKE GILEAD DOWN FROM THE INSIDE, BUT THIS TIME SHE'S NOT ALONE. TARA BENNETT TALKS **THE HANDMAID'S TALE** SEASON THREE WITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER KIRA SNYDER. PRAISE BE!



FOR TWO SEASONS, BRUCE Miller's television adaptation (and expansion) of Margaret Atwood's seminal novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has earned its status as pinnacle dystopia. While zombie plagues, unsustainable planets and technological subversion are all chilling, there's nothing quite like the horror of Gilead made real.

The exceptional cast, led by Elisabeth Moss as Offred/June, and Miller's harrowing contemporary riffs on Atwood's three-decades-old narrative have made the series a global must-watch. It's become watercooler television so bleak and absorbing that most viewers find themselves emotionally spent by the end of a typical hour, which is why season three's new tagline of "Blessed be the fight" feels like it's coming at a time when the women of Gilead, and the rest of real humanity, need it most.

The season two finale sets up that shift in mood as Offred/June hands over her new baby to Emily (Alexis Bledel), an escaping

Handmaid, so she can stay in Gilead to search for her other older daughter, Hannah (Jordana Blake), who is still trapped in this totalitarian society. It was a choice that polarised fans who couldn't believe June would stay in the nightmare of Gilead for any reason. But for Miller and his writers, including co-executive producer, Kira Snyder, June's choice represents her watershed moment.

"When you see [June] raise her head at the end, and the look in her eyes, and the way [Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House"] kicks in, that is the mindset that drives her, definitely, through the whole season," Snyder

“She has been reborn. She's going back to strike back however she can, and that starts off with a bang”

tells *SFX*. "She has been reborn. She's going back to strike back however she can, and that starts off with a bang at the very beginning of the season."

Snyder says the writer's room went into the season researching heavily the experiences of free women from Isis-held territories and how women existed in occupied France during World War II. "[We asked] how do you push back when you have a brutal, pervasive and very present force there? In episode two, you see what it looks like, both on the positive side and on the dangerous side."

Over two seasons, the writers have meticulously laid breadcrumbs that there are other dissenters in Gilead, and with the reveal of the Martha network – women in service positions in the homes of powerful men – June is going back to find a pool of potential allies. Snyder says the new season is about June pursuing those allies and figuring out how to become a hero. "She's coming to understand that this is her Handmaid's tale, and lots of people in this world have their own stories.



No one suspected they'd both been crying moments earlier.



Serena's reading of *The Great Gatsby* was especially moving.

How to be heroic in other people's stories is a large part of her drive."

While June has often been internally defiant, Snyder says she comes back informed "with a sense of resistance and rebellion" that defines her arc this year. "Blessed be the fight" is not a notional fight. It's her striking back however she can. But she is not an action hero. She's still operating within this very restrictive, very powerful totalitarian regime. Her journey this season is finding where, and how, to push back."

BLESSED BE THE FRUIT

As viewers know, June, and all of the women in Gilead, have plenty of enemies and subjugators to navigate. Primarily for June, it's been the Commanders and Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd). But there's a blurring of the lines now as expected antagonists like Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski) and a founder of the Colonies, Commander Lawrence (Bradley Whitford), have shown themselves willing to push back against the system they created.

Under the Waterfords' roof, June will mourn with Serena Joy over the loss of their beloved baby, Nicole, but that doesn't mean their dynamic will experience a sea change. "Because Serena made this big move in helping Nicole get out, that doesn't mean there isn't regret or second thoughts, because this is a bell that you can't un-ring," Snyder explains. "The repercussions ripple through in a lot of different aspects. She has been changed in

some very fundamental ways, but it's never as simple as a 'redemption arc.'"

As in season two, it will follow events outside Gilead, especially regarding the fate of Emily and the baby, and survivors in Canada like Moira (Samira Wiley) and June's pre-Gilead husband, Luke (O.T. Fagbenle). Snyder says, "If you think of Gilead as a cancer, just because you cut the cancer out of yourself, did you get it all? We ask in what ways does this system impact you even if you think you're free?"

But the biggest piece of the puzzle will be June herself, as her own awakening for change will infect everyone around her. Snyder details, "It all comes back to June, because she makes the people around her see themselves more clearly, and they don't always like what they see. One of June's superpowers is making people really see themselves, and that's definitely a piece of what is going on with Lydia [and the Waterfords] this season."

All of this serves to present a more hopeful season for June and her allies as they take a more proactive role in the battle against their oppression. "The odds are overwhelming, but she's changed," Snyder says of their heroine. "She is not the same June you see in season one. There are a lot of stand up and cheer moments in season three, and we're super excited for the audience to see those." ●

The Handmaid's Tale season three airs on Hulu in the US from 5 June. Its UK broadcast is currently TBC.

HOW DOES THE HANDMAID'S TALE DIFFER FROM THE BOOK?

Examining some major departures between text and telly...

As the series continues to get picked up for new seasons, the places where Bruce Miller and his writers diverge from Atwood's source material become more apparent. A television series needs a lot of story engine to keep moving forward, and by the end of season three, there will be 36 hours of the series. Thus, finding new directions to take the narrative is imperative. Here are a few changes they've made already...

OFFRED'S NAME

In the book, Offred never reveals her pre-Gilead name. In the series, we know it is June, which is the name many readers surmised from clues left in Atwood's text.

THE CANADIAN SURVIVORS

In the series, characters such as Luke and Moira get major narrative expansions that explore how they are coping in their new lives outside of Gilead. The book only alludes to their emotional lives outside.

NICK'S BACK STORY

June's Gilead lover (and the biological father of Nichole) gets a more in-depth back story than the book. His recruitment into the Sons of Jacob and becoming Commander Waterford's Eye is entirely original to the show.

AUNT LYDIA LURKS

In the book, after Offred is trained in the Red Centre by the terrifying Aunt, she isn't seen again in the narrative. In the show, Ann Dowd's Lydia is the primary boogey-woman for a host of Handmaids that have gone through her tutelage.



MEN IN BLACK:
INTERNATIONAL

SUITING

NEW STARS. NEW SCUM. THE GALAXY DEFENDERS GO GLOBAL IN **MEN IN**



UP

BLACK: INTERNATIONAL

Words:
Nick Setchfield
Interview:
Jane Crowther



RAY-BANS, SHARP SUITS AND protecting Earth from the scum of the universe. Classic style never dates, it just comes back again.

“We’re sort of reigniting it,” says producer Walter F Parkes, keeper of the *Men In Black* franchise for over 22 years. While Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones defined the dapper alien-zappers across three movies, latest entry *Men In Black: International* – a sidequel, if you must, not a reboot – introduces two new agents in the form of Chris Hemsworth and Tessa Thompson, reunited after their turn together in *Thor: Ragnarok*. “We all felt that *Men In Black 3* completed not quite a trilogy, but the end of a story was

told,” Parkes tells *SFX*. “The revelation that, in fact, the relationship between Tommy and Will was not an accident. And it felt like that had its own completeness.”

“We were beyond lucky with Tommy and Will, and they’re inextricable from what the movie is and was. But it’s also a very strong concept. It’s the idea of a secret police that monitors alien activity on Earth. We didn’t really think about a *Men In Black 4*, but when this idea came – the idea of a young woman who had an encounter as a child, who has been lied to her whole life, and has spent 20 years trying to find the *Men in Black*, taking us to an international adventure, that sounded interesting to us.” →

ALL MOVIE IMAGES © © 2019 CTMG, INC.

Men In Black: International introduces its newbies amid a familiar mix of hi-tech gizmology and extra-terrestrial intruders. Suiting and booting against the shape-shifting threat of the Hive, Hemsworth is the cocksure Agent H – “Oddly enough it was H before Hemsworth” – top operative in the MIB’s British division. 007 with a licence to neuralyze.

“I don’t want to give too much away because there’s an interesting reveal about him,” teases Parkes. “But when we meet him he’s quite renowned because he and Liam Neeson [High T] repel an invasion from a horrible, horrible race – the two of them alone, with just their wits and their series 7 De-Atomizer. For the last four years he’s been living up to that hero’s identity, and having trouble living up to it. So the movie sort of unpacks what action movie we’re in. He’s sort of like a good cop. He’s driven to catch the bad guy, but in so doing he’s also finding out the truth about his own backstory.”

It was the Asgardian interplay between Hemsworth and Thompson in *Ragnarok* that convinced Parkes that here were two leads who could match the on-screen chemistry of Smith and Jones.

“MIB films are cop movies. It’s in the merging of the cop movie and sci-fi that we have our special place”

“And then I found out [Tessa] has this amazing filmography and is this beloved actor who’s done so much great work. I mean, her talent is quite endless. Her experience is quite brave. And she had already started to emerge into this universe of ‘the big movie’.”

Thompson’s Agent M is a new recruit – but one with lifelong links to the clandestine defence force. She glimpsed the *Men in Black* as a kid, and while her parents’ memories were erased she escaped the neuralyzer. Her need to know the truth takes her into the agency’s immaculately tailored ranks, in partnership with Agent H.

“There’s a very specific journey that Tessa’s character goes on,” says Parkes. “She and Chris sort of complete each other in a very universal character way.”

Given *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* have proved the appeal of female-fronted adventure, such a gender-balanced double-header feels timely – and, admits the producer, overdue. “It was true 20 years ago. We just took too long to realise it. So it’s the right choice that didn’t take a lot of thinking.

“This is a particular story about a particular character who happens to be a woman. The head of *Men in Black* in *Men In Black 3* is



“We’re a bit overdressed for the street market.”



There must be an ointment to cure that, fella?

Emma Thompson, so it’s sort of baked into the premise. I don’t think it’s a big deal.”

The returning franchise is also now competing in a post-Marvel world. *Men In Black: International* comes armed with the stars of *Ragnarok* and a screenplay by *Iron Man*’s Matt Holloway and Art Marcum, but Parkes knows he’s entering an arena where expectations of tentpole cinema have been disrupted and redefined.

“I always say that the *Men In Black* films are cop movies. And it’s in the merging of the hardboiled cop movie and imaginative science fiction that we have our special place in the universe. And the counter-argument is yeah, that’s true, but after 15 years of Marvel movies dominating the marketplace, are the expectations somewhat bigger? All I can say is: we try to find the right balance.

“I think we probably have

a little more action than ever before,” Parkes continues. “I think probably our alien count is a little bit greater than ever before. But I’m certainly hoping that there’s a concise quality to a good *Men In Black* movie. In fact, most of them run less than 100 minutes. I think the first two are less than 96 minutes. And I think that’s a good thing.”

The storytelling may stay as sharp as the Paul Smith suits but, as the title shouts, this instalment has a global reach. Not only do we see Blighty’s own frontline of interplanetary defence – look for a spectacular battle outside St Paul’s – but the action leaps from New York to Italy to Morocco.

Again, says Parkes, the franchise is responding to box office trends.

“We actually wrote a version of the script that took place in Las Vegas,” he tells *SFX*. “It didn’t feel right. To be very honest, the motion picture world has changed. And one of the ways





The swirling wheel of doom really annoyed her.



"Admiral Ackbar's my brother-in-law, y'know?"

it's changed is the international market is completely different than it was when we made the first *Men In Black*. The international market dominates now.

"Once we talked about [going] international, I just started to remember when I was a kid, when I first saw *From Russia With Love*, those Bond movies or other international thrillers where you're with a great group of characters and going from capital to capital. So that provided another set of really fun tropes to play with. Those conventions allow the audience to feel 'OK, I understand where I am'. So you can subvert them, which is a really fun approach."

But Parkes knows the movie also has to deliver the crowd-pleasing beats demanded of a beloved franchise. "We do ask ourselves: what are the things that the audience will just miss? Obviously the basic tenets of the franchise are right there. There's this big secret facility, in the middle of a city, hidden in plain sight, and its relationship with these aliens that are all over the place. There certainly is

ALAMY (2)

JUMP TO IT

The crazy crossover we never saw



It nearly happened: a genre-busting team-up between two of the studio's biggest franchises, mashing the black-suited operatives of the *Men In Black* with Channing Tatum and Jonah Hill's underachieving cops Jenko and Schmidt.

"I remember when I got a phone call from the then-president of Columbia, saying, 'Pull over, I have to tell you something,'" Parkes tells *SFX*. "He said, 'What about mashing up *Jump Street* and *Men In Black*?'"

The producer acknowledges with a smile that it's "almost like a marketing executive's dream – but when you really come down to it, the two franchises [operate] on very different principles. *Jump Street* takes ordinary undercover cop ideas and plays them as big and broad and goofy as you can. It's genius. I love all the *Jump Street* movies.

"*Men In Black* takes very exotic, almost absurd situations of science fiction, and plays them straight. So I thought from the very beginning that was going to be a tough one to pull off, because the tone of the two movies were very, very different. But it was certainly something we tried."

Amazing no one's pitched *Jumanji In Black*... yet.

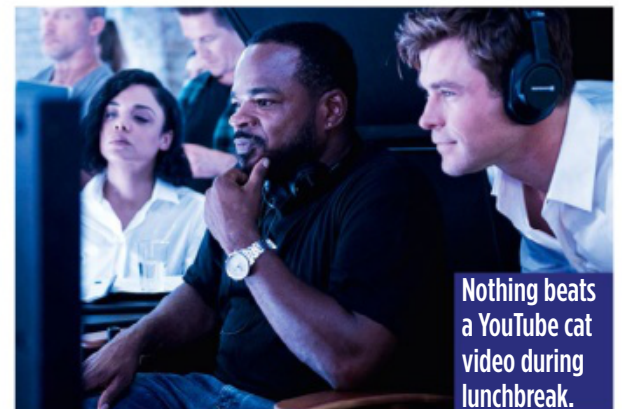


a moment where we see Tessa transform into a *Men In Black* agent, because that was a great sequence. We've had ongoing conversations on whether or not there is a dog alien. It's something we ask ourselves all the time. Is that mimicking the other ones? Or is that a required part of the franchise?"

Men In Black: International is the first entry without Barry Sonnenfeld at the helm. This one's directed by F Gary Gray. Which titles on his resume convinced Parkes that here was the perfect choice to bring the franchise back?

"I would say *Straight Outta Compton*. I just think *Straight Outta Compton* is one of the great movies of the last ten years. And strangely enough, more than *Fast & Furious 8*, more than *Friday*, *The Italian Job*. I thought *The Italian Job* has a sort of elegant swing to it. It's the only way I could put it. Strangely enough, it reminded me of some of the tonal aspects of *Men In Black*. It's just the way that it feels tossed off.

"So Gary has experience," Parkes continues. "He's unusual. He's a guy who's had major hits in many different genres. So the fact that he wanted to stretch himself into this genre, that's



Nothing beats a YouTube cat video during lunchbreak.

a good thing. That's an exciting thing. And he's shown his ability to work in different genres.

"And the other thing is, I think that you look at *Straight Outta Compton*, and you see what he can do in terms of intimate relationships. And then you can see his big movies, and realise that he can deal with all of those complexities. That's very hard to find. So I think those are the things that really brought us to him."

After two decades on the planet-protecting beat, Parkes is confident there's fanbase demand for another *Men In Black* – and future adventures for Agents H and M. "I think that's one of the reasons we're making the movie. It's interesting – when you look at *Men In Black*, it doesn't belong to a universe like Marvel or DC or *Star Wars*. But there is something about *Men In Black* that sticks with people. I don't know why, really. But here it is.

"Look, we live in a time where Hollywood lives on franchises. I think it's a valid franchise, and I'm hoping it takes hold." ●

Men In Black: International is released 14 June



MEN IN BLACK

LUCKILY DIRECTOR **BARRY SONNENFELD** AND SCREENWRITER **ED SOLOMON** WEREN'T NEURALYZED AFTER MAKING *MEN IN BLACK*... THEY LOOK BACK ON THE EXPERIENCE WITH SIMON BLAND



“IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE 22 YEARS AGO in some ways but it feels like a really long time ago in other ways,” laughs director Barry Sonnenfeld, recalling the shoot for *Men In Black*. “I don't know any franchise that goes five years between the first and second, then ten years between the second and third, but somehow that's what happened. I'm really proud of the movie, but it was a really hard one to pull off.”

Back in 1997, there was little expectation for Sonnenfeld's high-concept space adventure. Based on a relatively unknown comic book from author Lowell Cunningham and illustrator Sandy Carruthers, its story focused more on demons, vampires and the undead than the clandestine existence of aliens on Earth. It wasn't until producers Walter F Parkes and Laurie MacDonald hired *Bill and Ted* co-creator Ed Solomon to pen a script that the Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones-fronted *Men In Black* we know today began to take shape.

“It was very imaginative, very dark – very different to what the movie became – but it was

the core idea that I thought was brilliant,” says Solomon on first reactions to the comic. “I thought it needed to be a comedy. If you made a movie about the fact that we have aliens living among us that we don't even know about, and if we could do that in a comedic way, I thought it could be really fun.” With his take locked down, Solomon began drafting a story – one which ultimately followed hardened MIB Agent K (Jones) and rookie J (Smith) on a mission to stop a giant alien cockroach (Vincent D'Onofrio) from stealing a galaxy and starting an intergalactic war. “Walter and I pitched the first two acts to the studio and said you're going to have to read the third in the finished script – which was clever because I don't think they realised we didn't actually have a third act,” laughs Solomon. “Finding it took a long time. It was such a high-concept idea that everyone had a different point-of-view on what the movie should be.”

As Solomon's script developed, so did the *Men In Black* universe. Sonnenfeld signed on as director, swapping the story's multi-city →



ALAMY (1)

narrative for a purely Manhattan backdrop and Steven Spielberg jumped onboard as executive producer; guiding the film's script and creature design and ultimately convincing screen veteran Tommy Lee Jones to don the monochrome suit of MIB alien-buster Agent K.

"When Barry got involved he said he wanted to do *The French Connection* with aliens," says Solomon on the story's relocation to New York. "We never changed the core idea. It was the same story, just set in Manhattan instead of all over the world."

With Jones installed, Sonnenfeld started the search for Agent J, and a fresh-faced newcomer quickly rose to the top of his list. "I remember my wife and I reading the script together," recalls Sonnenfeld. "We finished and I turned to her and said 'Tommy Lee Jones' and she turned to me and said 'Will Smith'. Will had only been in *The Fresh Prince Of Bel Air* but I always felt that you never want two funny people in your comedy. You need one straight man and one funny man. We were very lucky."

FUNNY TONE

Luck aside, there was one small yet crucial aspect that Sonnenfeld believes was key to the film's success: "*Men In Black* had a very specific tone and we never moved off that tone," he tells *SFX*. "What was hard was maintaining the comedy while you're trying to save the world and make the audience believe the stakes are really high. Tone is a very difficult thing to pull off." Especially when one of your lead actors is unaware of what genre he's working in. "Tommy started first as Will was finishing *Independence Day* and Tommy and I disagreed for 106 days," reveals Sonnenfeld. "He thought I was trying to make him not funny."

"The first day I worked with him we were doing a scene in the desert where he speaks to an alien named Mikey," he says, taking us back to the film's illegal-alien opener. "Tommy has a line which is 'put up your hands and all of your flippers'. It's my first day working with Tommy Lee Jones, who's already intimidating, and he says it as if it's a comedy line."

"I said, 'You know, Tommy, I think it's going to be funnier if you don't acknowledge it's funny.' Don't hit the comedy – let the audience decide what's funny."

Despite the director's pep talk, Jones continued to amp-up the humour, much to Sonnenfeld's dismay. "He hated me," he laughs. "Tommy wanted to be funny, I didn't want Tommy to be funny. By the end of the film I'm walking up to him with my eyes down and the script out in front of me. I would just point to the line and go, 'Say it like you don't know it's funny.'" It wasn't until the film's release that Jones realised what genre he was in. "Tommy loved it and now we're best friends," smiles Sonnenfeld. "In every single interview he was being told how funny he was – because he's



J and K whip out the big guns to defeat the sugar water-guzzling Edgar-Bug, but according to screenwriter Ed Solomon, that wasn't always the plan: "The President of the United States was going to give a speech, and what was essentially perceived as terrorist activity was in fact a giant alien birth the size of a city, happening underground. The Men in Black understood this but humans were completely misperceiving what was happening and about to create an intergalactic disaster. It was this big philosophical cross-connect that was entertaining and conceptually interesting but ultimately not fitting in with where the movie was headed."

never been funny in his life. At every interview, he said the secret to being funny is to stand next to Will Smith and do whatever Barry Sonnenfeld tells you to do," chuckles the director. "I just thank God I didn't give up because if Tommy was funny, the tone of the movie would be so off."

For Solomon, the pairing of Smith and Jones was a good lesson on economic screenwriting. "Tommy was the perfect counterbalance to Will," says the writer. "I tend to overwrite and Tommy would cut out swathes of dialogue and convey an entire paragraph with a simple glance. Tommy would trim lines and Will would add. There's probably a dozen great jokes that Will improvised on set, which is always a gift."

Meanwhile *Men In Black's* aliens, led by Vincent D'Onofrio's Edgar-Bug, were taking shape under the expert skills of creature maestro Rick Baker. "I'd drive Rick crazy," remembers Sonnenfeld. "I'd say, 'Why do all the aliens look like humans? Create an alien that has no eyes and no mouth.' He would create this amazing creature and I'd say, 'That's great but without eyes how do we know where he's looking?' Rick would give him eyes and I'd ask, 'You know, without a mouth, how will we know when he's talking?' so Rick would give him a mouth," he smiles. "Before you know it, we're back to a human-centric alien."

The shoot spanned most of 1996 and incorporated many last minute script-tweaks during production. One major sticking point was the film's climax, with Sonnenfeld only



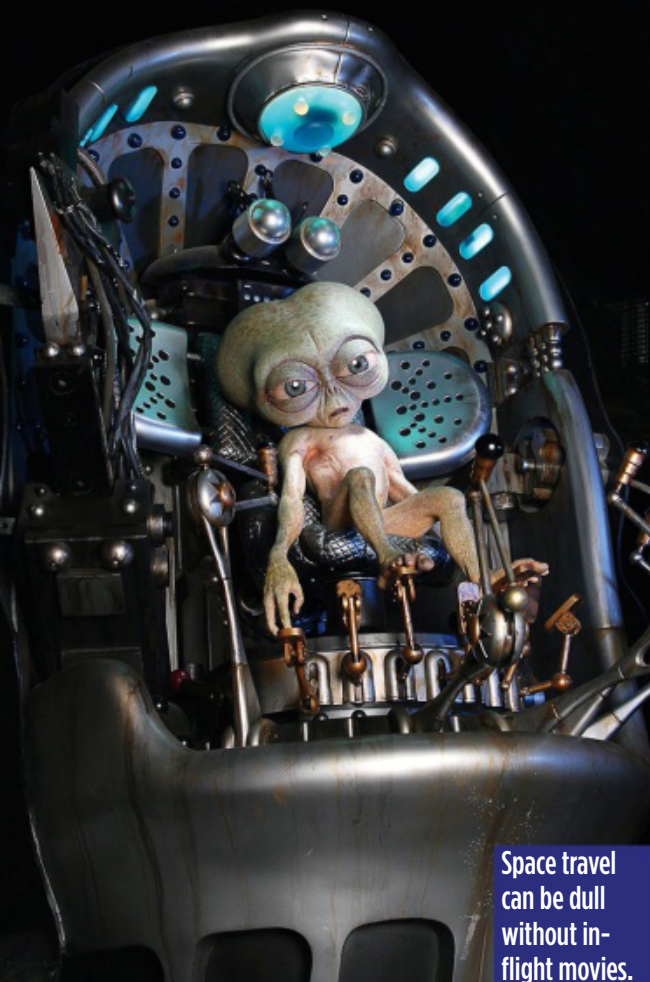
"When he leaves we need to burn that bar stool."



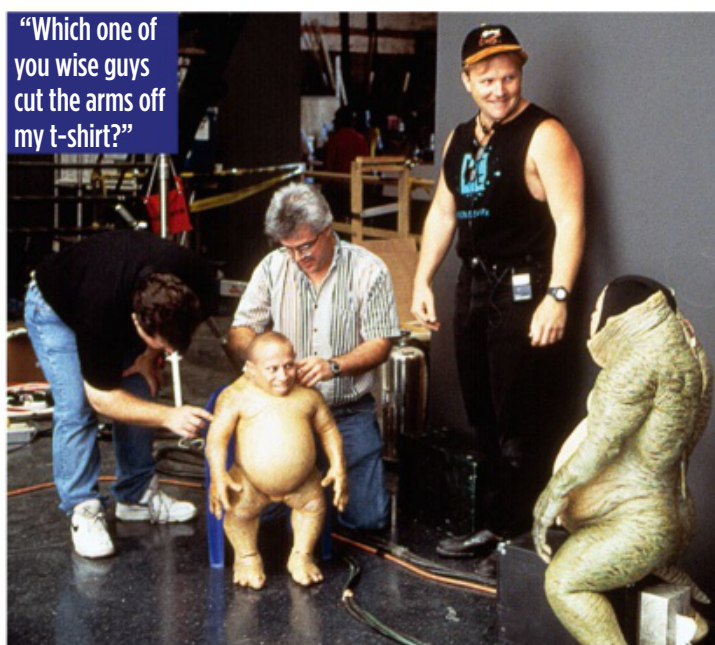
Ever get the feeling you're being watched, Will Smith?



B&Q's new range of pot plants isn't selling well.



Space travel can be dull without in-flight movies.



"Which one of you wise guys cut the arms off my t-shirt?"



This is what you get when you leave dirty dishes in the sink.



"For the last time, I'm not Will's chauffeur, I'm his co-star."

A BUG'S LIFE

Pest practice protocol

Will Smith's Agent J resorted to cockroach-stomping to stop Vincent D'Onofrio's Edgar-Bug from leaving Earth with the film's micro-galaxy McGuffin intact. Don't worry though, no creepy crawlies were harmed on Sonnenfeld's set. "We were using real cockroaches and between takes the people from ASPCA had to make sure we recounted them and that we didn't lose any," reveals the director. "I said, 'Really? Cockroaches?' and they said, 'We've got to defend all creatures otherwise where do you draw the line?' And they were right. We were literally counting cockroaches between takes to make sure none had gotten away."



landing on J and K's climactic Edgar-Bug battle at the World's Fair shortly before it was shot. "We had an action-adventure comedy with no adventure," admits Sonnenfeld. "Our original ending involved Will Smith's J and the Edgar creature debating the nature of the universe and humanity's place in it. I thought: we don't need more talking, we need some action."

Solomon elaborates on the development of the film's final battle: "My original ending was more philosophical. To me, it was supposed to embody the idea at the core of the movie, which was humans think one thing is going on but they have absolutely no idea about what's really going on. I think it was the producer, Walter, who said, 'What we really need is two guys with guns facing down a big ugly alien.'" Sonnenfeld adds, "The ending was written a week before we shot it, but that often happens."

With its ending in place, *Men In Black* finally hit screens in June 1997 and was an instant hit.

"This was one of those rare times where a lot of hard work, trial and error and ups and downs ended with a movie we can all be proud of"

Critics raved over Jones' stoney delivery, Will Smith became a certified star overnight and Baker's Edgar-Bug special effects won an Oscar.

For Sonnenfeld and Solomon, it was the perfect pay-off for months of hard work. "We all knew we were on to something interesting and unique," reflects Solomon. "I was very aware at the time that this was one of those rare occurrences where a lot of hard work, trial and error and ups and downs ended with a movie that we can all be really proud of. Being involved in *Men In Black* has been one of the great blessings of my life. It was such a great moment."

"You never know why something's going to succeed or fail," adds Sonnenfeld. "When pundits wrote about what the big summer films were going to be, *MIB* was not in the first five – we weren't supposed to be the biggest movie of that year. I love how we snuck in under the radar." ●

SUPER

BAD

A SUPER-KID BREAKS BAD IN **BRIGHTBURN**,

WHICH ASKS: WHAT IF SMALLVILLE-ERA
SUPERMAN WAS EVIL? PAUL BRADSHAW


TAKES FLIGHT WITH DIRECTOR

DAVID YAROVESKY

YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOW anything about *Brightburn*. If you've seen the poster, watched the trailer or read anything about James Gunn's top secret "evil superhero" horror project, it's only because the filmmakers didn't have a choice. If it was up to director David Yarovesky, you wouldn't even know what the film was about until you watched it.

"I have memories of walking into *Cloverfield* and my friends telling me I was going to see *Voltron*," laughs Yarovesky, only half joking. "It was this big mystery that came out of nowhere. If you read a blurb of the *Brightburn* plot in some trade announcement two years ago, it would have been a pretty boring introduction to a pretty exciting idea. So we went completely dark. Some of my closest friends didn't even know the movie I was making. I really didn't want people to see this coming."

Starting with a loose story idea written by Brian and Mark Gunn (cousin and brother to James, who is producing), the film took a hard left into horror when Yarovesky came on board back in 2017. "It was much more of a thriller back then," explains the director, previously of *The Hive* and long-time friend of the Gunn



clan. “I read it and I immediately told them that I *needed* to make the movie, and then I told them that I firmly believed the film should be a pure horror. The first nugget of an idea in my mind was shooting a superhero like John Carpenter shot Michael Myers – of taking everything to the worst possible place it could go.”



CHILD'S SLAY

In short, that means reimagining what a young Clark Kent might have done if he was actually an evil mass murderer. Elizabeth Banks and David Denman are the Midwest farming couple who pray for a child and get an alien baby instead – burying his crashed escape pod in the barn in the hope that he grows up to be a normal kid, and getting a nasty, face-melting surprise when he discovers his real powers as an angsty super-teen.

Newcomer Jackson Dunn (last seen, very briefly, as the teenage Scott Lang in *Avengers: Endgame*) takes the lead role but it was actually the costume that proved to be more important than the casting, with the filmmakers nicknaming his super suit “the SMIVA”, or “the Single Most Important Visual Aspect”. “I knew that when people saw him in his final form, in his full costume, they were going to ultimately judge whether they thought the movie was cool or not, whether it was scary or not, and whether this whole weird thing we were trying to do worked at all,” says Yarovsky. “It had to be so scary. You had to see it and be terrified. So often you see horror characters and they all look the same. They just become some kind of shapeless thing that’s coming at you, but this needed to look iconic.”

Admitting to dragging his whole cast to hell and back throughout the tough shoot (“So much running, hiding and rolling around in really gross dark places”), Yarovsky is excited to finally be able to let audiences see the film he’s been hiding from them for two years.

“It’s shocking how trained we’ve all become to expect stories to be told in the same way,” he laughs, already expecting a backlash from people who like to see their superheroes saving the world instead of burning it – and brushing off rumours of sequels and crossovers until all the secrets are out. “This film will freak people out. But that’s probably a good thing...” ●

Brightburn is released on 21 June.

BLACK MIRROR

TRE

ANTHOLOGY SHOW **BLACK MIRROR**
IS RETURNING FOR THREE MORE EPISODES.
SHOWRUNNERS CHARLIE BROOKER AND ANNABEL JONES
TALK TO WILL SALMON ABOUT
TANDEMS, UBER AND... MILEY CYRUS?!



THREE

P L E

BLOODY TECHNOLOGY, EH? *Black Mirror*, satirist Charlie Brooker's darkly twisted science fiction anthology show about life in a world saturated with smartphones, ever-more-efficient gadgets and the often dehumanising effects of social media, returns to Netflix for its fifth season soon. *SFX* is trying to chat to Brooker and executive producer Annabel Jones over the phone, but our line keeps hissing and crackling ominously. Is this

the work of some malevolent algorithm trying to stop us from getting to the truth about the new episodes? Unlikely. When we finally get a clear signal, Brooker offers an alternative, typically self-deprecating explanation: "I was so boring your phone exploded."

That's not true, of course. Both Brooker and Jones are a delight – witty, thoughtful and clearly excited about sharing the fruits of their labour with the world. It's been a long road to finally finishing season five – largely because of a certain interactive episode that premiered over Christmas...

Released into the world on 28 December – just a day after it was announced – "Bandersnatch" was *Black Mirror*'s most ambitious and attention-grabbing instalment yet. Tapping into the nostalgia for Choose Your Own Adventure games, it was an enormously ambitious undertaking, and one that had a major knock-on effect for the rest of the season it was intended to launch.

"It was a completely new proposition for us," says Jones. "It was mammoth in scale and execution and, in all truth, we were making it up as we went along. We had to reinvent all of the processes for how we make the show: the production, the filming, editing, the score. It was just huge. I think we got away with it..."

That's one way to put it. "Bandersnatch" was the surprise telly highlight of the festive season. It did, however, mean that season five had to be knocked down to just three episodes (from the usual six that have typified the show's Netflix years), and released several months later.

"We could have rushed things and tried to do six episodes," Brooker muses. "But, to be honest, that would have been shit! It became clear that 'Bandersnatch' was its own beast – and making it was the equivalent of doing about five episodes in one."

"Also, it felt right that 'Bandersnatch' stood alone," says Jones. "It was such a different way of filmmaking and such a different experience that we wanted people to have the chance to lose themselves in it and not be thinking about what the other episodes would be like."

The other benefit of separating out the special from the rest of the season, says Brooker, is that it helped demonstrate the flexibility of the show's format. "Nobody batted an eyelid when it went out as a standalone. That means that going forward – and I hate people who use that expression – we can do more standalones, more seasons... who knows? The ground is the limit."

MILEY CULTURE

But for now, season five. Three episodes "all on the longer side, all just over an hour", according to Brooker.

Specific plot points are, naturally, being kept tightly under wraps, but Brooker and Jones are at least willing to share with us a few hints about each episode.

Jones describes "Striking Vipers" as being about the question of "how you sustain a long-term relationship in a world of instant gratification". The episode is directed by Owen Harries, who previously helmed "Be Right Back" and the Emmy and BAFTA-winning "San Junipero", and stars occasional Avenger Anthony Mackie alongside *Aquaman*'s Yahya Abdul-Mateen II ("It's a secret Marvel/DC crossover," Brooker deadpans) and *American Violet*'s Nicole Beharie.

"I think it's a very thought-provoking story," Jones continues. "It's very *Black Mirror* in the sense of there's lots of ideas running through it, but it's very emotional, sad – and sometimes uplifting. It's not something that you will have seen before." →

ALL BLACK MIRROR IMAGES © NETFLIX, STOCK IMAGES © ISTOCK/GETTY

A T

So, just how *do* you sustain a relationship in a world ruled by instant gratification? “You get a tandem,” says Brooker. “Turns out... tandems. The film is actually sponsored by the Tandem Society of Sao Paulo. I’ve just given away the twist.”

Another episode, “Smithereens”, is described by Brooker as the season’s “nail-biter”. It grew out of a conversation between the two showrunners about ride-sharing apps such as Uber or Lyft.

“It started out with that thing of, you get in the back of an Uber and you’re looking at your phone, and when you look back up, you’ve no idea where the hell you are,” says Brooker. “It’s set very much in the present – or rather, the very, very near past...”

The episode stars *Sherlock*’s Andrew Scott – very much in the spotlight following the second season of *Fleabag* – alongside Damson Idris and Monica Dolan. Directed by James Hawes, who helmed “Hated In The Nation” back in season three, it’s described by Jones as being suffused with “a kind of soft dread”. It sounds like the sort of dystopian premise that *Black Mirror* made its name with.

The third episode – though both Brooker and Jones are keen to point out that a final

“There’s a lot of playfulness – our dark sense of humour is probably a little bit more on display this season”

running order has yet to be decided – is “Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too”, directed by critically-acclaimed Norwegian filmmaker Anne Sewitsky. It will likely be the episode that draws the most public interest, given a spot of high-profile casting... As well as Madison Davenport and *The Nice Guys*’ Angourie Rice, it stars a certain Miley Cyrus. Yes, really.

“That episode is quite a romp, in many ways,” says Brooker. “It’s about celebrity, it’s about loneliness, it’s about music and it’s about digital assistants in the Alexa or Siri mould, so there’s quite a lot going on in it. It’s also quite bananas.”

Getting Cyrus in the show was, in Jones’s words, “the dream” – but it wasn’t one that either of the duo really expected to come true.

“We sent her the script thinking, ‘As if she’s going to say yes to this,’ says Brooker. “We sent it in the full knowledge that it probably wouldn’t even be rebuffed – it would just be ignored. But we very quickly got word back to say that she was interested.”



Miley’s character is a former child star – something that clearly resonated with the actress and musician, who grew up in the spotlight playing the part of Hannah Montana.

“She had all sorts of insights and opinions on the script,” says Brooker. “We had a Skype call with her. She really related to the character and had some useful observations – and very quickly she was on board. I think people will be surprised at what she gets up to in the episode, and by her performance.”

Jones agrees: “I think it was quite an emotional experience for her. She brought lots to the script, but also I think she felt emotional reliving some of these things. She gives a very raw and vulnerable performance. I think it’s one of the best things she’s ever done.”

LIGHTENING UP?

Black Mirror has a reputation for having a certain dark and cynical world view – something that Jones says occasionally dismays the producers, though given that its first ever episode was about the British Prime Minister being forced to have sex with a pig on live television, it’s hardly an unearned rep. Still, both Brooker and Jones reckon that the show is more nuanced and playful than is sometimes acknowledged.

“I would say in the three stories in season five, there are a lot of very poignant

moments and bleak moments, and nail-biting or sad moments,” says Brooker. “But there’s also a lot of playfulness in there. Our dark sense of humour is probably a little bit more on display this season.”

Could that be, perhaps, because the world outside has grown so overtly nightmarish over the last few years? Is it hard to keep up with a world of Brexit, Trump and climate change?

“Yeah, we’re the happy window that you can stare through as the real world goes to shit,” says Brooker. “We don’t tend to do stories about Brexit, or things like that. We feel like we sort of did Trump, in a way, with [season two’s] ‘The Waldo Moment’. It’s not like we’re ignoring that stuff though – we’re all living in it, and we’re reacting to it while coming up with story ideas.”

“It feeds through,” agrees Jones. “If you look at something like the portmanteau episode, ‘Black Museum’, it’s all backgrounded there. The good thing about Trump is that he makes *Black Mirror* look like light relief!”

But if that sounds worryingly like *Black Mirror* may be losing its bracingly bleak edge, don’t be too concerned. “It’s not that we’ve suddenly gone all light and fluffy,” Brooker reassures us. “Nobody is singing ‘Chim chiminey, chim chiminey...’ I’ve got to finish the song now, haven’t I? ‘Chim chim cher-ee...’” ●

Black Mirror season five starts streaming on Netflix on 5 June.

UBER MENSCH

Andrew Scott is a taxi driver demanding answers in “Smithereens”

What’s “Smithereens” about then?

This is a story about what it’s like to kidnap someone, rather than what it’s like to be kidnapped. Chris is a guy who’s in an extreme situation, and he’s not a kidnapper any more than I am or you are. But it’s what he’s driven to to get answers. It’s really a story about grief, and it’s full of heart.

Hypothetically: you’ve kidnapped someone. Who would you demand to speak to?

I’m Irish myself, so the Catholic Church! The organisation. That’s the thing that makes me the most angry. You just want to go, “How can you preach that and practise that? Answer the question!” Which is what this film is about. That you go, “I want to speak to the top guy. I will do whatever I need to.” There’s great psychological logic there.

Has your relationship with technology changed since doing the show?

Yeah, I’ve become really aware of it. We’re in an age now where we’re only just becoming aware of phone addiction and technological addiction. In the future, we’ll start to look at these dopamine hits that you get during the day as something very sinister.

Jordan Farley



Andrew Scott’s character Chris is the worst Uber driver ever!

JESSICA JONES



SEARCH FOR THE

JESSICA JONES

SEASON THREE SEES
THE MARVEL TV
UNIVERSE BOWING
OUT ON NETFLIX. IAN
BERRIMAN VISITS
THE SET AND TALKS
TO THE CAST

THE NETFLIX/MARVEL TV universe is dead – or, at least, on its last legs, stumbling towards an open grave. We first had reason to suspect it'd come to this when *Iron Fist* got the chop on 12 October last year. Cancellations for *Luke Cage* and *Daredevil* pretty much confirmed it long before official word came in February.

Why did the axe fall? There are various theories. The imminent launch of streaming service Disney+ means any continuing Marvel shows on Netflix would effectively act as ads for a competitor's brand. Then there's audience figures: Netflix don't reveal them, but some analytics suggest that *Daredevil's* US audience fell by 57% between the last two season openers. Finally, churn just seems to be part of the streaming giant's modus operandi, a preference for having shiny new things to lure subscribers, meaning long-running series like *Orange Is The New Black* are the exception.

It's fallen to super-strong private eye Jessica Jones to take the final bow – something none of the cast seemed to have any inkling of when *SFX* visited the New York studios on 10 October. Back then, they were full of enthusiasm for the latest run.

MAMA USED TO SAY

As is typical for the most female-focused Marvel show, it centres on three fascinating, independent women. First up, the PI herself. Season two brought tragedy for Jess, as her similarly powered mother was shot dead by adoptive sister Trish. After two seasons which dug deep into backstory, the third is, we discover on collaring star Krysten Ritter in a break from shooting, more forward-facing.

"In seasons one and two we learn so much about Jessica's history," Ritter says. "What she's been through, how that informs who she is, and why she has problems with alcohol and PTSD. When her mother was killed, the last thing she said was, 'You do give a shit.' Now Jessica's trying to figure out, 'Do I actually care?'"

Picking up maybe six months after that finale, season three takes its lead from Alisa

Jones's words: "'Hero' isn't a bad word, Jessica. It's just someone who gives a shit and does something about it."

"Jessica's now figuring out her place in the world, and what it means to be a hero," Ritter explains. "She's coming to terms with the idea that many are called and few are chosen – and she's been chosen. Because of that, she needs to rise to the occasion. Can she actually show up and be the hero she's destined to be? That's what we're playing with this season."

She's risen to the occasion too, as for the first time she's directing. It's an achievement Ritter, a self-confessed workaholic who's also written a novel and – as half of indie rock duo Ex Vivian – released an LP, is hugely proud of.

"It was the most exciting thing that's ever happened!" she beams. "We had the best time. Nobody knows the show better than I do, and Melissa [Rosenberg, showrunner] and I have a great shorthand. I was begging her to direct for a year and a half. Finally Melissa convinced Marvel to let me, and I was so thrilled. I brought my A-game and studied."

Not that much study was required, as Ritter had picked up a lot through observation.



"I'm like a sponge," she says. "I see all the directors come in, and their different styles: what works, what's efficient, what makes us all be like, 'Okay...' So I had this great on-the-job training. Everyone was willing to get on the phone and talk through what the experience is like before you get on set – the politics behind the scenes, and the hoops you jump through."

She always walked the cop safely to his front door.





"Okay, we'll nail it on take 4,567. Action!"

She's back behind the camera today, though. Before dashing back to set, she supplies some context on the scene they're shooting now.

"Jessica does something public to help somebody else," the star explains. "For the greater good, she sucks it up and goes on camera. Which obviously for her is like getting a root canal!"

WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES

It begins with Jessica, Trish (Rachael Taylor) and Trish's pushy mother Dorothy (Rebecca De Mornay) walking into Jess's bedroom after her TV interview... or would, if the door wasn't sticking. "Shit!" says Ritter, struggling with the handle. "It broke! I'm fixing it - I can do it all!" she declares, determined to add yet another string to her bow. "No, it still doesn't work, sorry." A crewmember rushes on to tighten it up with a screwdriver. Meanwhile, De Mornay keeps cool by holding up a pocket electric fan.

Eventually a slate's held up - *Violet* (the show's cunning cover name), episode eight, scene 23 - for another take. Jessica plonks herself down on a chair, sardonically sighing, "That went well..."

"Are you kidding?" replies Trish. "They're gonna play that clip all day long! If you wanted to get the word out, you nailed it."

The scene's then stolen by De Mornay's

“Jessica’s coming to terms with the idea that many are called and few are chosen, and she’s been chosen”

calculating talent agent. She expresses pride in the pair for “making the city safer”. Aw. Then quickly moves on to monetising the situation: “I’m thinking action figures, videogames... I will work on drawings for your new costume.”

“Mom, stop!” begs an exasperated Trish, as Jessica exits, muttering about “living up to this hero shit”. But Dorothy has dollar signs in her eyes: “We’re gonna be rich!”

As the sequence indicates, though Jessica and Trish are initially estranged (shooting someone’s mum in the head will do that...) eventually they come together again. But expect it to take a while.

“There’s a bit of runway to go for them to get back on the same page,” explains Rachael Taylor later. “The first order of business is rebuilding trust between the two. It’s a really interesting process of them learning to see things from each other’s side. That was something I was really excited to play: figuring

CLOCKING OFF

Aneesh Sheth is Jessica’s new assistant Gillian



What’s Gillian like?

She’s very sassy! She makes snarky comments all the time. She’s always commenting on things that are happening around her.

With Jessica’s last assistant, Malcolm, it was clear she didn’t really want one.

It’s very much the same - mostly it’s at arm’s length. But I think Jessica understands that Gillian is coming from a place of concern and love. Even though she doesn’t necessarily appreciate all her snark, she understands that she’s just looking out for her.

What do they clash over?

Mostly time. Gillian loves to be on the clock, so if it’s past five Jessica will say, “Do this”, and she’ll say, “Well, it’s five o’clock. I’ve got to go!”

What’s your take on her backstory?

I think the position she’s found herself in was hard to come by, so things like that. I had a big discussion with [showrunner] Melissa Rosenberg about where we thought Gillian came from, which was very exciting - particularly because I’m transgender, and Gillian’s also trans. Marginalised actors are getting the power to create narratives in shows like this, and I think that’s really important. There’s no mention of her being trans, nor a narrative around her identity. Which I think is wonderful, because it’s not always about that narrative.

© GETTY (1)

out how Trish could see where Jessica was coming from, and seeing if Jessica can discover where Trish might have been coming from.”

But the most exciting development in Trish’s arc is that this season explores the character’s development of powers - hinted at in the season finale when she dropped her phone, then caught it with her foot - like her comics counterpart did as the hero Hellcat.

“It’s been really fun,” Taylor says of her role’s upped action quotient. “Every season has gone a little further in terms of Trish’s physical capabilities, and season three’s a really big jump.” →

NO HOLDS BARRED

Newcomer Jeremy Bobb talks about grappling with the role of *Jessica Jones*'s latest bad guy

Season three introduces a new villain to the show: Sallinger, played by Jeremy Bobb, whom you may have seen as slimeball literature professor Mike Kershaw in *Russian Doll*.

"He comes in early on when it's discovered that he's doing some illegal things," Bobb tells *SFX*. "When he figures out they've learned some of the stuff he's been up to, he gets pretty angry. Then it's, 'What can I get on [Jessica] and a couple of people in her group that can help me keep this secret, and maybe keep doing it?' They egg each other on for a while, until it gets way out of control."

Though the name doesn't ring any bells, fans of the comic may recognise him...

"There is a character that he's drawn from," Bobb teases, "But my understanding is it's pretty loose. I think it was an inspiration more than anything."

By the sound of it, Sallinger may be a vigilante.

"This stuff he does is a big part of his sense of himself, and it's something he associates with justice," Bobb says. "And he has no intention of stopping."

The big appeal about the character was how many faces he has.

"I like to play characters that shift shape a bit," Bobb explains. "That's

interesting – that he carries himself one way with one set of people, and a different way with others."

He also appreciates that Sallinger is not stereotypically villainous.

"He has a childhood that's damaged," he reveals. "I've worked pretty hard to make him not seem too evil. On the surface he seems pretty harmless. He has a normal list of activities outside of this stuff they discover that's buried underground."

Sallinger is also rather anal. "Everything's very specific: the way he keeps his home, the way he goes about his work. And he speaks a little more crisply than most of the characters. His general tone clashes a bit with what this world is."

One last intriguing detail: he's a wrestler (Greco-Roman, not WWE).

"One thing from childhood is that he had some damaging stuff at home, and an escape was the wrestling team. So his physical antagonism is driven heavily in that way."

This necessitated some training. "I visited a couple of wrestling camps, and we had coaches come in. The stunt guys trained me up really well to do most of it myself, which I think is helpful for this guy because that's a big part of the multiple sides of him. You wouldn't see him walking down the street and think he could do some of the things we see him do..."



Jessica won a luxury cruise in a prize draw.

“I have a lot of pride in how I play Jessica and how we portrayed her, and a great sense of ownership of her”

What Taylor finds really satisfying about the storyline, however, is the way it tackles the notion of celebrity.

“Running through season three is this idea of fame,” she says. “And watching that play out for both Trish and Jessica is really interesting. Trish wants very much to be recognised for the things she does. Not just to matter, but to *be known* for whatever heroic acts she may do. So there’s some interesting questions about reputation, notoriety, identity. I think that’s very relatable, because Andy Warhol’s prediction has come true: we’re all famous for 15 minutes now, because of social media.”

So after years of wishing she was “special” like Jessica, does finally having powers make Trish feel complete?

“What’s so clever about *Jessica Jones* is that superhero powers are really just an allegory,” Taylor notes. “You can substitute the word ‘self-esteem’ – or personal power, or your power as a woman – and it still plays. Trish is a character marked by a deficit in how she feels about herself because of her upbringing and being a child star, and having to win people’s love rather than feeling she truly deserves it. So I’d be surprised if getting powers would suddenly remedy it all. Fundamentally, she feels like she’s *not enough*. And I think if you truly feel like you’re not enough, there’s nothing you can throw at that to make you *enough*.”

Trish’s star certainly isn’t in the ascendancy professionally, as we see on taking a quick tour of two new sets. One is the former radio talk

WHISKEY IN THE JAR?

There’s one thing we were dying to ask Krysten Ritter...

You spend a lot of time swigging from bourbon bottles. What are you actually drinking?
I’m just drinking bourbon.

Really?!
Yeah. Every time... *Noooo*, I obviously don’t drink at work. I still work for Disney!

We were just wondering if you’re sick of drinking iced tea, or something like that...
No, it’s peppermint tea, and it’s lovely! I mean, it’s better than watered-down Coca-Cola or something. That’s a little inside scoop for you!



show host’s new workplace: a small set for shopping channel American Retail Network. A raised catwalk curves around the back; a rail of sweaters stands waiting to be pimped. Expect to see the *real* walls of the studio when Trish is off-camera.

Meanwhile, Jeri Hogarth, the ice-queen lawyer now suffering from neurodegenerative disease ALS, has a new office, having launched her own firm. We stroll around, taking in the aubergine walls, the abstract painting behind her glass desk (all angry red blocks), and the awards lined up on the mantelpiece. The place screams success. When we catch up with Carrie-Anne Moss, she says she’s still adjusting to her new surroundings.

“When I think of Jeri, I think of myself in that *other* office set,” she reflects. “I have to

constantly be like, ‘Who am I in this space?’ It’s so important that she looks like she has it all together. I think it represents everything for Jeri. It’s rebuilding her life, being successful, being on top. It’s *everything* – especially at this phase in her life, when her health is dwindling. She’s trying to regain her power, while feeling incredibly powerless.”

Jeri has a new employee: Jessica’s former assistant Malcolm (Eka Darville). But there’s a more significant person in the picture.

“A new love comes into her life that’s pretty deep and rocks her,” Moss reveals. “It’s someone from her past, and it’s like she represents her innocence. This is that one pure thing she had in her life. An old relationship, like a true love, that Jeri wants to be around again.”

It seems this relationship will reveal a softer side of Jeri, whom we’re so used to seeing in intimidating alpha mode.

“I love when Jeri has that power,” Moss says. “I find it incredible to play! But I have a lot of moments where there’s more vulnerability this season, especially with the relationship stuff: this woman that I had a history with, who knows that I can’t use that way with her. When I get to go back to that more fierce Jeri, I’m like, ‘That feels *really good*!’”

WRAPPING UP WITH THE JONESES

Given the relish with which the cast talk about their roles, it’s not hard to imagine their collective dismay when the axe fell.

“What’s cool about it is she’s not fully formed in season three either,” Rachael Taylor says of Trish assuming her powers. “So I’m excited for audiences to see a little of her journey towards who she becomes.”

Sadly it’s unlikely that we will ever see the culmination of that journey. Or Jeri properly coming to terms with her condition. Or Jessica wholeheartedly embracing heroism.

“Playing a character for this long, she becomes a part of you, in a way,” Ritter reflects, “Which is cool. I never thought about that before, because it’s the first time I have played a character for four years. I really have a lot of pride in how I play her and how we portrayed her, and a great sense of ownership for her.”

Both pride *and* sadness are certainly fully justified, because there aren’t many television shows out there that have succeeded in creating so many well-rounded, capable but flawed female characters. We only have 13 more episodes in which to enjoy spending time with Jessica, Trish, Jeri and co. Let’s raise a glass to them – or, perhaps more appropriately, knock back some bourbon straight from the bottle... 🍷

Jessica Jones season three comes to Netflix in June.

Brought



To Book

MARIA LEWIS

The urban fantasy writer bringing greater diversity to genre fiction

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Photography by Josh Florence

SOMETIMES, IT TAKES A WHILE FOR THE world to catch up – it was 2014 when Maria Lewis pitched the idea of *The Witch Who Courted Death*. While she sold *Who's Afraid?*, her much acclaimed novel about a female werewolf and its sequel *Who's Afraid Too?*, publishers weren't keen on the idea of an urban fantasy where, to quote Lewis, "The main character was a queer woman with a limb difference."

Fast-forward five years and, while progress has often been maddeningly slow, things have changed. "Not only is representation and diversity something publishers want to have on their roster, it's commercially viable," says Lewis. "You'd like to think there's a hunger for stories like that, but the reality is they only get greenlit if there are similar examples that have made money out there in the market."

"If Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* didn't exist, if Marvel's Bucky Barnes wasn't around or, heck, even something like *Atomic Blonde* hadn't been extremely successful, I don't know if there would've been a belief that *The Witch Who Courted Death* would find an audience, regardless of whether the big bosses like it or not."

In which case we would've missed out, because the novel shows how Lewis is coming of age as a writer. At its centre lies Casper von Klitzing, the world's most powerful medium and a character readers first met in *Who's Afraid Too?*, whose life is turned upside down by an attack that leaves her learning to use a prosthetic arm. Casper's told the attack was orchestrated by witches, but she's not buying this.

MENTAL STRENGTH

For Lewis, the book was in part a way to explore a different kind of protagonist to earlier books. "I was really excited to spend time with a main character whose strength isn't physical," she says. "[*Who's Afraid?* protagonist] Tommi's an angry, impulsive, occasionally villainous werewolf who can decapitate an enemy with her bare hands if she wants. Casper's power and her strength is mental, it comes from her mind, and she's in her 30s: she *knows* who she is, she's not on that journey of self-discovery like Tommi."

That said, these are books set in the same fictional universe, and certain elements and writerly tics inevitably recur. In particular, they're written by a novelist who grew up, initially in rural New Zealand, steeped in genre. "My grandad would tell me stories about werewolves, that they existed, and it was the kind of place where you'd believe that what he was telling you wasn't bullshit!" she says.

She also loved old monster movies, such as Universal's *Frankenstein*. "The characters were really complex and

relatable, but they were also stuck in these changing situations and being very misunderstood," she says.

Nevertheless, Lewis, who has Polynesian heritage, began to question traditional genre narratives. "A lot of werewolf stories are almost exclusively male and almost exclusively white male stories, which is kind of strange because if anyone is going to understand blood and gore, and turning into a monster a few days a month, it would be women," she says. In contrast, *Who's Afraid* and its sequel were "about female rage, the feminine grotesque and using lycanthropy as a metaphor for the experience of growing up biracial".

ANY WITCH WAY

From a different angle, when Lewis was growing up in the 1990s, tales of witches – *The Craft*, *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*, *Practical Magic*, *Charmed* and many more – were at the centre of popular culture. "It started an early obsession with witchcraft and Wicca practices, which manifested into adulthood, and as you grow up you realise a lot of these elements are the same principals of feminism: sisterhood, equality, self-power," says Lewis. *The Witch Who Courted Death*, she adds, "uses witches and ghosts to explore the idea of 'otherness' and familial relationships".

It's an approach she will continue with her next book, *The Wailing Woman*, which "follows a family of female banshees who run a forensic cleaning business". Banshees, she says, are "a means to talk about finding your voice and using it". The book will also feature familiar characters from Lewis's other books, including *It Came From The Deep* (think *The Little Mermaid* meets *Creature From The Black Lagoon*), which gives Lewis immense satisfaction. "You can't just immediately start with a shared world, you have to earn it, and by book five we're *deep* into it," she says.

Considering she's also a journalist and screenwriter, and travels extensively to research and promote her books, Lewis is clearly busy – but she's not grumbling. In part that's down to a health scare, a transient ischemic attack, or mini-stroke, that she had at 22. "Strokes actually happen to young people all the time, it's super-common," she says. "It's just that it's not really a super-sexy disease."

This incident helped Lewis (now an ambassador for the Australian Stroke Foundation) to find focus. "It became this catalyst for me becoming a lot more hungry and a lot more ruthless in terms of trying to get [my writing] in front of publishers and trying to get my stories out there." ●

The Witch Who Courted Death is released in paperback on 13 June, published by Orbit

Biodata

From

→ Born in Arrowtown, New Zealand. Now lives in Sydney, Australia

Greatest Hits

→ *The Witch Who Courted Death* has been nominated for Best Fantasy Novel at the Aurealis Awards (Australia's most prestigious genre awards).

Random Fact

→ Lewis is highly critical of the racism in Australian society: "Things take so long to change and it's really fucking exhausting for people."



“MY STROKE
WAS A
CATALYST AND
MADE ME
MORE
RUTHLESS”



And Now Their Watch Is Ended...

THE CAST OF **GAME OF THRONES**
LOOK BACK ON EIGHT EPIC YEARS
WITH STEPHEN KELLY





THE END OF *GAME OF THRONES* is the end of an era. Not only for television, which it redefined as a blockbuster medium. Nor its fans, who have followed every death, twist and battle with obsessive devotion. But its cast, for who the show's end represents the passing of eight years of work and life. *SFX* sat down with eight stars to find out how it feels to leave Westeros behind...

SOPHIE TURNER (Sansa Stark) I think *Game Of Thrones* means everything to me. It's been my adolescence, it's been half of my life basically, and the only half I can really remember. It's my family. I had substitute fathers, substitute uncles, substitute brothers. I met my best friend on there. It's the best acting class I could have ever asked for. It's been my whole life, and without *Game Of Thrones* I think I would be a completely different person.

JOHN BRADLEY (Samwell Tarly) *Game Of Thrones* was my entire twenties. It was my first everything. It was my first job, not just in acting; it was my first job in anything. I went straight from university straight into it. So it's been an entire performative decade of my life in which I've made great friends and done work that I'm so proud of, and have had the best bosses in the world. And that's going to

take some coming out of. But for the rest of my life, when I think of my twenties I'm going to think of *Game Of Thrones*.

ISAAC HEMPSTEAD-WRIGHT (Bran Stark)

Game Of Thrones has been my entire childhood. It's like, "Doesn't everyone grow up on *Game Of Thrones*?" I think it's only recently dawned on me just how mental my childhood has been.

HANNAH MURRAY (Gilly) Sometimes I say that

I can't quite hold the phenomenon that the show is in my head as a thought at the same time as holding in my head the fact that I'm in it. So it's definitely a little surreal and confusing, and I think it'll take a long time to process what the show really is.

MAISIE WILLIAMS (Arya Stark) I still struggle to grasp how huge it is. It's really hard because you're like, "Well, do I just think that because I'm on it? Is it really that big?" You see all the numbers come in and fans dressing up, but because it's our entire life, it's hard to be objective and see it from the outside.

HEMPSTEAD-WRIGHT I think it's probably in the last year, having actually been done with it, that I realised how big it is. Like, "This is so bizarre. This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. The chances of this actually having happened are so slim and unbelievable." But one moment I think of was season five when I had the season off, because being away from it and having one degree of separation you suddenly see it referenced everywhere and people talking about it everywhere and you yourself get excited about seeing it because you don't know what's going to happen. I think that was a real moment where I was like, "This is special. This is extraordinary."

NIKOLAJ COSTER-WALDAU (Jaime Lannister)

What does *Game Of Thrones* mean to me? It means I can pay off my mortgage! →

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FANS AND FAME

COSTER-WALDAU You meet people that are so dedicated and know much more about this world than I do, and that passion is exciting. But it's humbling too, because someone will meet me and they'll go, "Oh Jaime!" but it's the character. It has nothing to do with me.

TURNER You can't see your peers as what everyone else sees them as. You're like, "Oh, that's my best friend" and to other people they're these amazing characters that make them go, "Oh my God. I'm so excited!"

WILLIAMS I'm friends with a few of the cast of *Stranger Things*, and that show really blew up. People always say, "Oh my God, what are they like in real life?" and I'm like, "They're just my friends." People build this idea of someone and it's beautiful to see the excitement in their eyes, but at the end of the day we're all still figuring this out like everyone else. We still can't believe that it's got so big.

HEMPSTEAD-WRIGHT I can't get away from fan theories! Every time I post anything on Instagram the comments are just, "Are you the Night King? Are you the Night King? Hey Night King. How are you, Night King?" But it's really nice to see how much passion it inspires in people, because it's not like we're a TV show people just watch on a Sunday and don't care about. People have literally invested their lives into it. So it's an honour and a privilege to have people theorising and thinking so intensely about your work.

JOE DEMPSIE (Gendry) It hasn't really affected my day-to-day life too much. I can still walk to the shops. But *Game Of Thrones* has allowed me to do incredible things. We did the season seven premiere in Los Angeles, and HBO put us up in this lovely hotel in Beverly Hills. I went for a wander later on that night and ended up in a lift with just me and [former Manchester United manager] Jose Mourinho. They were doing a pre-season tour, and we got invited to go and watch them train and meet the team. I went with John Bradley, who's a massive United fan. It was just such an amazing thing to witness him seeing his heroes' reaction to him. Like, when Paul Pogba saw John, Pogba lost his mind! It felt like appropriate currency, being in this show. Like, it's just as good for Man Utd to have the guys from *Game Of Thrones* down as it is exciting for us to be there.



Both were determined not to blink first.

THE LAST DAY

TURNER The last day was incredibly difficult. I'm actually starting to miss the mud and being sweaty and smelling like shit – literal shit, because it's horse shit all up your dress.

WILLIAMS I don't know if anything else was ever as real or raw as the show tried to be. When we were looking at these vast freezing cold landscapes, we were really there. They were the sort of extremes you only ever find yourself in when you're acting, and it's like...

TURNER ... Oh right, my green room is a shipping container.

WILLIAMS Yeah! And Liam [Cunningham] is like, "Let me smoke inside", and everyone's like, "NO!" Even the bad bits are beautiful memories.

HEMPSTEAD-WRIGHT I didn't think I'd cry, but

I did. I broke down in floods of tears. It's weird, those kind of moments where you're like, "How should I be feeling? This is a pivotal moment. I should be feeling something!" You stress yourself out a bit.

COSTER-WALDAU My last day was actually a perfect way to end my *Game Of Thrones* experience, because it was an amazing set. It was a great scene, a beautiful day. Northern Ireland can be very miserable with rain, but this was a day of just beautiful sunshine. I'd seen quite a few colleagues have their final scene. I've been standing watching a lot of tears flow and a lot of speeches, and I was like, "Oh God, I don't want to be emotional..."

GWENDOLINE CHRISTIE (Brienne Of Tarth) I know you cried.

COSTER-WALDAU I didn't cry.

CHRISTIE I know you cried! And you were annoyed that you cried.

COSTER-WALDAU How long did you cry on your last day?

CHRISTIE Two hours! I couldn't stop! I was a mess!



Bran still couldn't decide whether that dress was purple or gold.

“How do you move on after this? This has been eight years of my life, and I have loved every moment of it”



The “This is a knife” gag only works if you pick up the right one.



He didn't have the heart to tell her the fur was from her old direwolf.

THE FUTURE

CHRISTIE How do you move on after this? This has been eight years of my life, and I have loved every moment of it. But personally I am very ready to change and work on other things, because I've explored this character – although I still feel like there's a lot of depth – and what she's presented to me is a template of something I want to explore more: depth in a character who is a woman and the stories of our society. It's given me a real taste for that.

COSTER-WALDAU I like to think that *Game Of Thrones* will eventually make a good *Trivial Pursuit* question. “Multiple Oscar-winning actress Gwendoline Christie, what was her first major role?”

CHRISTIE If only! It will be interesting to see if *Game Of Thrones* will endure. I think it will, because it feels like there were lots of firsts in this show. And also the writing is just very good. The books are very good. [Showrunners David Benioff and Dan Weiss] are very good. So it stands up on its own terms outside of it being a cultural phenomenon. I'm very interested to see how it will continue to resonate through our lives.

WILLIAMS I read other scripts now and think, “This is trash!” The stories are just not complex. And then sometimes you read a script which is definitely like 30 pages too long, and you think, “But there's still no twist.” It's sometimes really difficult to find something that surprises you. I think that's what the show has always done so well. And you can't do that sort of writing unless you are good at writing, because otherwise it just becomes sort of nonsensical, and you're just being shocking for the sake of being shocking rather than writing something that's believable. I'm constantly craving something which makes me, like, gasp as I read.

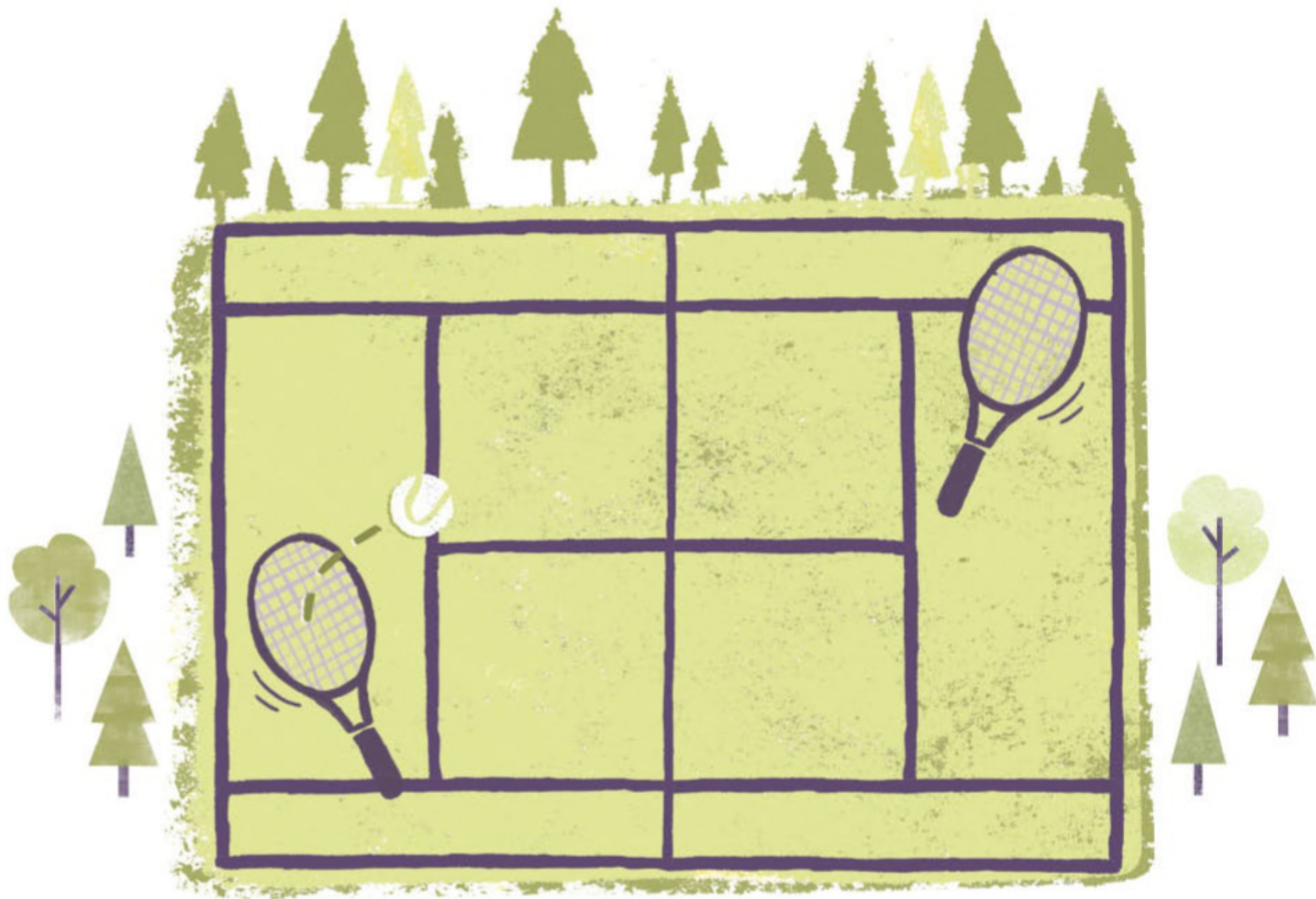
TURNER It just so happens that the first thing we ever did had the best writers and the best producers and best characters. Our first thing also had very empowered female characters as well. And so you go out looking for other scripts, and you're reading them and you're like, “Why is it written like this? Why haven't they included this and this and this? Why isn't it structured like this?” We have been spoiled. ●

The final season of Game Of Thrones is available to download now.

“This is the last time you take me to a Millwall game.”



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JULY
2019

edited by Ian Berriman

Reviews

CINEMA 84

TV 88

HOME ENTERTAINMENT 92

BOOKS 100

COMICS 108

GAMES & STUFF 110



84

**AVENGERS:
ENDGAME**
Finger-clickin'
good?

THIS ISSUE

51

REVIEWS

Highlights



86

**THE CURSE OF
LA LLORONA**

→ A spectre from Mexico haunts LA in another addition to the Conjuring-verse.



88

GOOD OMENS

→ The End Times are coming in this TV adaptation of the Terry Pratchett/Neil Gaiman novel.



100

FRANKISSSTEIN

→ Jeanette Winterson is the latest to put a fresh spin on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for her new novel.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED

★★★★★ SUPERB

★★★★★ GOOD

★★★★★ AVERAGE

★★★★★ POOR

★★★★★ TERRIBLE

AVENGERS: ENDGAME

We could do this all day



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

12A | 181 minutes

▶ Directors **Anthony Russo, Joe Russo**

▶ Cast **Robert Downey Jr, Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, Scarlett Johansson, Mark Ruffalo, Jeremy Renner, Josh Brolin**

➤ **After 21 films of absolutely** unprecedented big-screen world building and heroics, the Marvel Cinematic Universe brings its Infinity Saga to a rousing conclusion with *Avengers: Endgame*. Not a conclusion in the truest sense of the word – the Marvel machine will run as long as Kevin Feige and co continue to produce the most popular films on the planet. But there's a sense of finality that makes it feel like a true event in this era of never-ending franchise fare.

And while this is a very different beast from *Infinity War* – less a series of showdowns with giant purple meat sack Thanos and more a fleet-footed heist movie rooted in 11 years of character development – it's no less dazzling a spectacle, and even more of an emotional gut punch.

For the few yet to see it, we'll keep plot specifics to a minimum, as there are more surprises in *Endgame* than could fit inside a Flerken's pocket dimension. But it's no spoiler to say that after *The Snap-ture*, the surviving Avengers are suffering through the five stages of grief. Cap is closer to acceptance than most, helping others through support groups. Tony is stranded in space and, to some extent, denial. Black Widow and Thor are both depressed, the god of thunder blaming himself more than anyone for failing to go for the head. Hawkeye embodies anger, adopting the mantle of Ronin to brutally murder crims across the globe. Meanwhile, Banner... well, we'll keep the secret of his current status intact, as it's guaranteed to raise a smile.

Naturally, there's a plan, and it involves a problematic narrative device that sci-fi fans in particular are intimately familiar with, which allows *Endgame* to double as a backslapping victory lap for the entire MCU. With a staggering amount of fan-pleasing cameos, callbacks and cathartic reunions, there's a remarkably rewarding



No one was happy with how Thor had left the front room.



Tony's rendition of *Hamlet In Space* left a lot to be desired.

amount of payoff here for relationships and character arcs that have been building (or left hanging) for years. It shouldn't be all that surprising given *Endgame's* unenviable duty as the full stop on a 22-film series, but it often feels more like the finale for a long-running TV show than the latest entry in a movie franchise. Taking a nostalgic and somewhat indulgent trip through the history of the MCU, there's a case to be made that this is fan-service being favoured over coherent, accessible storytelling, with major emotional beats tied to minor details from

“A backslapping victory lap for the MCU”

films over a decade old. To an even greater extent than *Infinity War*, the more you've invested in this world, the more you'll get out of it.

Running at a bladder-bursting 181 minutes, *Endgame* is the



longest blockbuster since Peter Jackson's bloated *King Kong*, but it zips along at such a clip that you're never left drumming your fingers. What may surprise given *Infinity War*'s dour cliffhanger ending is quite how funny *Endgame* is, with the comedy and drama both perfectly balanced (as all things should be). While it may be more restrained action-wise than its predecessor, *Endgame*'s centrepiece battle tops anything in the MCU on the how-the-flip-did-they-do-that? scale, complete with some stunning acrobatic tracking shots through the battlefield that

recall Joss Whedon's iconic splash-page moments in *Assemble* and *Age Of Ultron*. Sure, it's all a bit brown, and with so much going on the action can whizz by, but there are beats in *Endgame*'s final act that reach higher highs than anything in the MCU to date. It's hard not to be overawed by the mad ambition of it all.

Despite a series of logic holes you could pilot a helicarrier through, and a few characters getting short shrift (most egregiously, Black Widow and Okoye), what impresses most is the gratifying sense of the journey

complete, of 11 years and 22 films with 30+ characters reaching an almost entirely fulfilling end point.

There will be more Marvel films, of course. *Spider-Man: Far From Home* swings into cinemas in less than a month and a half, and many of your favourite characters *will* return. But some emphatically won't, leaving this a decidedly bittersweet goodbye. Either way, you'll be glad you stuck with Earth's Avengers until the end of the line. **Jordan Farley**

i Director Joe Russo and Thanos creator Jim Starlin both make cameo appearances during an early therapy scene.

POST-MORTEM

10 spoiler-tastic questions and observations

SPOILER WARNING!

- Time travel quibble #1: Reality can't be changed unless you remove an Infinity Stone from the timeline? How does Steve appear as an old man at the end?
- Time travel quibble #2: If Gamora can travel from the past and live in the present, why can't Steve use his Pym Particles to go back and bring Tony/Natasha/Vision to the present?
- Time travel quibble #3: If Bad Nebula uses Good Nebula's last vial of Pym Particles to travel to 2023, how does Thanos and his army get there?
- Anyone spot Howard the Duck? And nice to see *Agent Carter*'s Jarvis (James D'Arcy).
- Thor confirmed for *Guardians 3*? Can't wait.
- What does Natasha's death mean for the *Black Widow* movie?
- Tony and Cap both get perfect endings, and Cap wielding Mjolnir is a transcendent moment.
- No post-credits scene, but the clanging metal is a neat nod to the first *Iron Man*.



- Anyone else get something in their eye when Morgan asked for a cheeseburger? *sniff*
- Marvel needs to resurrect their One-Shots so we can see Steve return the Soul Stone to Red Skull on Vormir. Talk about awkward.



DETECTIVE PIKACHU

Criminals: gotta catch 'em all!



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 104 minutes

► Director **Rob Letterman**

► Cast **Ryan Reynolds, Justice Smith, Kathryn Newton, Bill Nighy**

🔗 **It sounds like a cheese dream.**

The first ever live-action *Pokémon* movie, starring Ryan Reynolds as a wise-cracking talking Pikachu who wears a little deerstalker hat and solves crimes. But not only is *Detective Pikachu* somehow real, it's one of the funniest, most visually accomplished and fan-pleasing videogame adaptations that's ever been made.

Our reluctant hero is Justice Smith's Tim, a former Pokémon trainer who's travelled to Ryme City – a Poké-metropolis awash in neon and noir – to look for his estranged father, a detective presumed dead after a car crash.

What he finds instead is his father's surviving partner – a talking Pikachu with amnesia, who only he can hear – and a case that needs to be solved.

It's a masterclass in selling the surreal, with director Rob Letterman's decision to shoot mostly sans greenscreen (and on film!) proving vital to grounding the CGI Pokémon in a lived-in world.

Tonally, meanwhile, it's a delight, working both as an edgy parody of detective noir, and a heartfelt family-friendly comedy built around the inherent absurdity of Pokémon.

Think *The Lego Movie*; think Ryan Reynolds making you sob for a furry yellow rodent.

Stephen Kelly

i Other actors who were considered to voice the role of Detective Pikachu include Danny DeVito and Dwayne Johnson.

THE CURSE OF LA LLORONA

It's a crying shame



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 93 minutes

► Director **Michael Chaves**

► Cast **Linda Cardellini, Roman Christou, Jaynee-Lynne Kinchen, Raymond Cruz**

🔗 **A stealth addition to the** Conjuring Universe, *The Curse Of La Llorona* brings a centuries-old myth from Mexico to '70s LA. La Llorona translates as "the weeping woman", but it might as well have been "the shrieking woman" given the massive overreliance on jump scares involving Llorona appearing unexpectedly and making a loud screeching noise. If that's your thing then *Curse* offers cheap thrills, but anyone after depth,

narrative or originality can go cry.

The story goes that Llorona was a woman who fell for a man who gave her two children. When he left her she was driven insane with grief and drowned the kids. On realising what she'd done she killed herself, and is condemned to haunt the Earth searching for children to replace those she's lost.

Cut to the '70s, an era that was presumably chosen solely to fit in the tenuous *Annabelle* connection, and social worker Anna (Linda Cardellini) is investigating a case of a mother who's been keeping her kids locked in a cupboard. Is she an abusive mum, or is it the return of La Llorona?

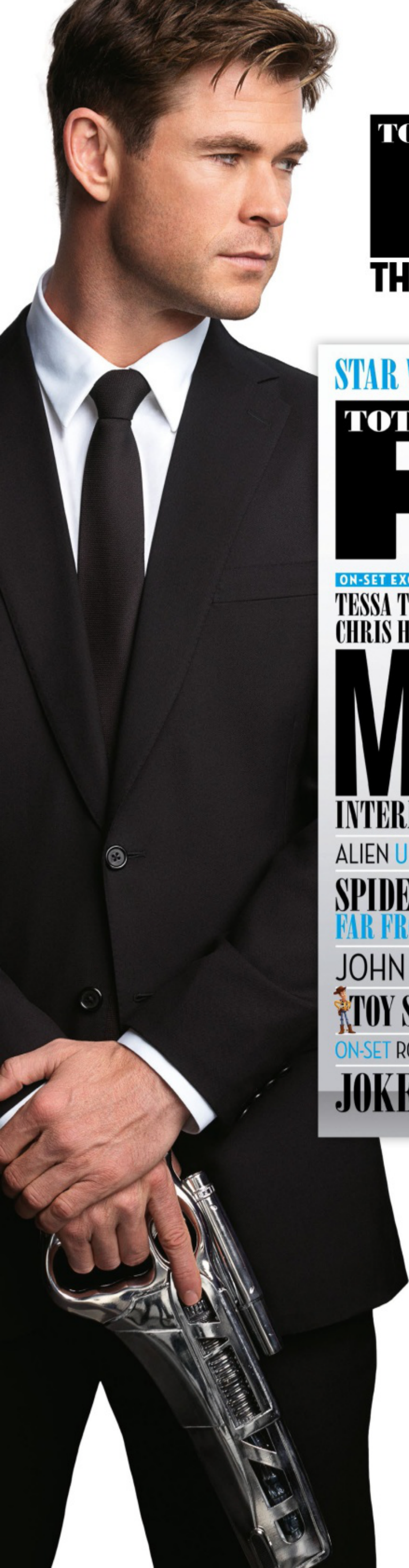
What follows is a frustrating series of scare setups where Anna



and her own two kids remain painfully incredulous even as Llorona appears repeatedly in their home and leaves burn marks on their arms. The plot, as such, is "She's coming to get you!" and not much more, while the look of Llorona is a couple of steps away from the *Insidious* ghoul, a pale, dark-haired woman in a white dress who's corporeal but also not.

This is a first feature for director Michael Chaves, who's also attached to *The Conjuring 3*, and while it's not as bad as *Annabelle* it's a long way from the heights of this once classy franchise, which is now in danger of giving up the ghost. **Rosie Fletcher**

i For a more interesting take on La Llorona, check out 2006's *KM 31*, a modern Mexican version with J-horror leanings.



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Tessa Thompson

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The Noddy Holder Club meets in the park every Tuesday.

GOOD OMENS

Apocalypse? Nooooo!



UK/US Amazon Prime, 31 May

► Showrunner Neil Gaiman

► Cast David Tennant, Michael Sheen, Miranda Richardson, Adria Arjona, Michael McKean, Jack Whitehall

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Anyone who's** been waiting nearly 40 years for a TV sequel to *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, your prayers (or, perhaps, demonic incantations) have finally been answered. *Good Omens* opens with a witty monologue from God and some frenetic animated graphics that are straight out of The Book.

But these words are lifted directly from Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's much-loved 1990 novel about an angel and a demon joining forces to prevent the

apocalypse, which Gaiman himself has adapted. Deciding to recast God (voiced by Coen Brothers favourite Frances McDormand) as, basically, The Book turns out to be a stroke of genius. The novel itself is only about 40% plot; most of the humour doesn't come from the characters or dialogue but from the two authors indulging in literary jamming sessions, creating passages of self-contained prose riffing off everything from religion and war to Japanese car manufacturing. Simply adapting the *story* would've left no place for some of the novel's most celebrated moments of comedy gold, so co-opting God as a narrator retains much of its flavour. Plus, some of the set-pieces are hilarious, especially an exploration of how

many angels could actually dance on the head of a pin.

There is *some* plot here too, though. David Tennant and Michael Sheen have a whale of a time overacting as the cocky demon Crowley and the effete angel Aziraphale, who have – in secret from their bosses – been colluding for centuries to maintain their cushy lives on Earth. But with the End Of Days coming they need to find a way to prevent the apocalypse, a feat made more difficult by the fact that the son of Satan has been mislaid...

Narratively, it's a bit of a mess. While the voice of God is a clever conceit, there's the nagging feeling it's also an excuse not to have to dramatise things properly at times. But such problems are piffling in

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

🍷 Crowley and Aziraphale get pissed together.

🍷 A Queen song pops up on the soundtrack.

🍷 There's a shot looking directly down (a God's-eye view – geddit?).



🍷 There's a cameo from someone really famous.

🍷 Reading the end credits, you realise that you completely missed a cameo from someone really famous.

🍷 There's a time jump of over 100 years.

🍷 Shadwell calls Madame Tracy a harlot (or something similar).

a series that exudes such an infectiously manic comic energy. Gaiman's additions for the TV version, including Jon Hamm's pompous Gabriel ("The Earth isn't just going to end itself") and a montage chronicling Crowley and Aziraphale's friendship through the millennia, mesh perfectly, and open out the story's universe. The child actors are a tad '70s BBC classic serial, but they're eclipsed by a conveyor belt of cult TV and comedy faves (Michael McKean, Josie Lawrence, Derek Jakobi, Johnny Vegas), all camping it up with aplomb.

While the serviceable effects aren't quite what you'd call cinematic, the elegant production design, stylised direction, absurd make-up (lizard toupees!) and quirky costumes all add to the exquisite silliness, and there's a hummable theme tune from David Arnold too. A heavenly delight, and devilishly good. **Dave Golder**

i Among the many Easter eggs, look out for a copy of Gaiman's *American Gods* and a clip from the film *Witchfinder General*.



YEARS AND YEARS

FIRST LOOK

In the Lyons' Den



UK BBC One, Tuesdays

US TBC

► Showrunner Russell T Davies

► Cast Russell Tovey, Rory Kinnear, T'Nia Miller, Ruth Madeley

EPISODE 1.01 "Our Friends In The

North, but moving 15 years into the future": a brilliant pitch you'd think had been done before. But no, Russell T Davies is the first to plant his flag on this territory.

Kicking off in 2019, then leaping to 2024, part one of his family saga efficiently introduces likeable Manuncian clan the Lyons and establishes the tone, which mixes bewilderment at the state of the world with down-to-earth domestic drama – a scene that signals cracks in Daniel Lyons's relationship via a spat about *washing your hands* seems characteristically bathetic.

Thanks to a strand about a Lyons kid's desire to become "post-human", it's actually more science-fictional than it's been sold as, but generally seems very low-key. Then Davies ambushes the audience, dealing a narrative gut-punch that'll leave older viewers thinking of another Northern near-future drama.

You could question the plausibility of certain events. Will everyday folk own household robots in five years' time? Could Ukraine's political situation really alter that much? But prediction isn't the point – it's showing how ordinary folk deal with extraordinary change. And we can't wait to see what life throws at the Lyons next.

Ian Berriman

i Anne Reid (gran Muriel) is one of the few to star in old and new *Doctor Who* ("The Curse Of Fenric" and "Smith And Jones").

WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS Season One

Fangs Of New York



UK BBC Two, Sundays

US FX, Wednesdays

► Showrunners Taika Waititi, Jemaine Clement, Paul Simms

► Cast Matt Berry, Natasia Demetriou

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 Sometimes it's the small things that nudge a comedy from "I suppose I could manage a chuckle" to "barking out loud in laughter". In *What We Do In The Shadows* – the new show spun off from the 2014 movie – it's the fact that Laszlo the vampire always shouts "BAT!" before he morphs into one. At first it's mildly amusing, but as the episodes pass it gets funnier and funnier.

It's just one of many, many funny moments in this wonderful

mockumentary series, which follows the lives of four vamps living in Staten Island. Batty Laszlo is played by Matt Berry, who seems to have waited his entire life to have this much fun in a role; Kayvan Novak is the goofy Nandor the Relentless; Natasia Demetriou is Nadja, Laszlo's wife and the show's best character – always rolling her eyes at her fellow vamps,

“Bodes well for years of toothy comedy”



while being just as useless as they are; and Mark Proksch is Colin, an "energy vampire". He's funny because we've all met one in real life, usually trying to talk to you at work when you'd rather stick pins in your eyes.

The humour's naughty (Laszlo makes vagina-shaped topiary!), the cast are stunning, and they ad-lib





with an impressive joke hit-rate. Best of all, the worry that the film used up all the best ideas is unfounded: there's a gleeful supernatural inventiveness here that bodes well for years of toothy comedy. Prepare for this to grab you by the jugular. **Jayne Nelson**

i According to writer Paul Simms, these vampires can't eat any human food – but they *can* chew on or suck leeches. Yum.






DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

-  There's a deep-dive original series reference.
-  The "Red Angel" shows up just in the nick of time.
-  Jett Reno puts Stamets in his place.
-  May calls Tilly "Stilly", slightly gratingly.



-  Georgiou slams Section 31's Leland with a withering putdown.
-  Ash Tyler's over-complicated backstory gets yet another wrinkle.
-  ... and raise a glass when a troubled on/off romance finally works out.

STAR TREK: DISCOVERY Season Two

Red Lights Spell Danger



UK/US: Netflix, streaming now

► Showrunner Alex Kurtzman

► Cast Sonequa Martin-Green, Doug Jones, Anson Mount, Anthony Rapp, Mary Wiseman

EPISODES 2.01-2.14 Two things were promised for *Discovery*'s second season. One was a move away from the war footing of the show's first year in favour of more actual, y'know, star trekking. The other was that by the season's end we'd understand how it linked up with the rest of the franchise. While this run of episodes isn't free of bumps in the mycelial road, it does honour both these pledges.

We pick up immediately after season one's cliffhanger ending. *Discovery* is face-to-face with the

USS Enterprise under the command of Christopher Pike (Anson Mount). A series of seven "red bursts" have been detected around the galaxy, and Pike's been tasked with taking charge of the Disco and searching for the truth behind the signals. It's a mission that forces Michael to face her estranged brother Spock (Ethan Peck) and brings the ship into conflict with the morally murky Section 31 – Starfleet's weirdly well-known black ops division, and Ash Tyler's new gig.

From that synopsis alone it's clear that this is the most fan-friendly the franchise has been since *Enterprise*'s fourth season. The difference is that *Discovery* always keeps in mind the mainstream audience. We don't

need to know why Starfleet abandons using holoscreens or even, really, why no one in the original series mentions Michael Burnham, but *Discovery* mines some pretty compelling drama out of both these elements.

It helps that the new cast members are excellent. Anson Mount plays Pike with infinite sincerity, the show leaning into the tragedy that hardcore fans know is awaiting him in a way that will actively improve future viewings of the original series. Rebecca Romijn's Number One is only in a handful of episodes, but makes a strong impression, while Peck's Spock is a younger, more troubled take on the iconic Vulcan than Zachary Quinto's movie version. Tig Notaro's Jett Reno, meanwhile,

is the show's new secret weapon, a hilarious, cranky genius who gives Stamets a run for his money.

There is a definite mid-season sag. The Big Bad's plan never makes a ton of sense, and several episodes have the distinct air of wheel-spinning. But given the troubles behind the scenes (the original showrunners were replaced partway through with new *Trek* uber-boss Alex Kurtzman), it's an impressive effort. And in its final two episodes, the show reinvents itself again quite spectacularly. Season three really is going where no one has gone before... and it can't come soon enough. **Will Salmon**

i Freeze-frame Pike's bio in "Brother" – somehow he has a Cardassian Medal of Valour! Did he lie on his CV?



CHAMBERS Season One



▶ UK/US Netflix, streaming now
▶ Showrunner Leah Rachel
▶ Cast Sivan Alyra Rose, Uma Thurman, Kyanna Simone Simpson, Nicholas Galitzine

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 While we're pretty certain the NHS doesn't screen for such things, every horror fan knows that body transplants from psychopaths are a very bad idea. Initially, the hoary old haunted spare part chestnut appears to be the basis of *Chambers*, a teen-fronted twist on *The Hands Of Orlac* featuring a vengeful ticker rather than murderous hands.

But as the series progresses you realise there's more going on. This is hinted at in the opening episode when Navajo reservation escapee Uncle Frank tells his mixed-race niece, Sasha, "In four hours the entire universe had to conspire together to save your life."

He's not wrong. Her new heart materialises with suspicious convenience. She's soon contacted by the donor's parents, an irritatingly New Age rich white American couple who seem to want to become her new surrogate parents. Then there's the bad dreams and her sudden compulsion to chop the tails off mice.

There's nothing particularly original here, but the cast is excellent, the Native American juju gives it an enticingly exotic feel, and there are some surprisingly effective moments of tension and horror. Annoyingly, though, the finale is more concerned with setting up season two than answering some of the more interesting questions. **Dave Golder**

THE SOCIETY Season One

Smells Like Teens Spirited Away



▶ UK/US Netflix, streaming now
▶ Showrunner Christopher Keyser
▶ Cast Kathryn Newton, Rachel Keller, Alex Fitzalan, Toby Wallace

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 The high concept of *The Society* seems to be not having a high concept. Other recent shows that riffed off William Golding's *The Lord Of The Flies* sci-fied up the idea, leaving the writers to point out, "This isn't really a show about teenagers on an alien planet/people stuck under a giant dome, it's actually an exploration of humans creating a functioning society from chaos." But with *The Society*, you can't help thinking Golding himself probably considered that as a title before coming up with something more evocative. This is a show proud of its influences.

It begins with all the high-school teenagers in a small New

“This is a show that's proud of its influences”

England town returning from a field trip to find the place deserted. There's still power and Wi-Fi, but they can't communicate with the outside world. Pretty soon they realise that looting and hedonistic partying are only short-term benefits, and that somebody is going to have to take charge. This is something the town's previously more entitled teens are not cool with.

The Society could easily have been an "issue of the week" show. Let's talk about gun control! Let's talk about crime and punishment! Let's talk about the drawbacks of two-party politics! It's all done in an unashamedly on-the-nose manner, invariably with lots of

teens arguing like an Oxford debating society until a token jock goes, "F**k this, let's hit someone." Despite the sledgehammer approach, it works on the level of provoking thought. It's also admirably non-partisan, holding a mirror up to today's America without a hint of red or blue filter.

But as drama the show's on dodgier ground. It takes a long while for the vast cast to bed in and for individuals to make an impact. Even then, many feel like familiar types, especially the jocks and the bad boys. The requisite teen relationship drama elements are variable too, with some distinctly unconvincing couples and contrived conflicts balanced by some genuinely sweet moments, especially as regards the LGBT characters.

The kids also accept their lot surprisingly quickly. Only later on is there any serious attempt to discover what's happened. And then there's the fact that everyone seems to still have perfectly laundered clothes months into their ordeal. Okay, there's power for washing machines, but these are teenage boys, right?

It does improve as the season goes on, however, delivering some tense set-pieces. And the arc plot surprises at just the right points to keep you interested, and ends with a narratively satisfying cliffhanger. Well, except for an odd epilogue that threatens to muddy the waters and introduce an element of high concept... **Dave Golder**

i Sean Berdy, who plays deaf character Sam, is a keen drummer; he's been playing (with hearing aids) since the age of six.



Their office five-a-side team was always one player short.

GLASS

Shattered expectations

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 20 MAY

2019 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Director **M Night Shyamalan**

▶ Cast **James McAvoy, Bruce Willis, Samuel L Jackson, Sarah Paulson, Anya Taylor-Joy**

➔ **Long before the superhero** genre ate the world, *Unbreakable* marked an intelligent, surprisingly soulful take on comic book mythology. Its creator, M Night Shyamalan, seemed set to be the new millennium's heir to Hitchcock and Spielberg, destined for a career of suspenseful, high-concept crowd-pleasers. Then his mojo crumbled, reducing him to a punchline, a name that could elicit jeers if it flashed up in trailers. The dream of *Unbreakable 2* – the sequel everybody wanted – became a threat, not a promise. How could the man who made *The Happening* ever do justice to the film we imagined in our heads?

But in 2016 the bets were off. *Split* saw the fallen auteur begin to claw back his rep – and by sneaking in Bruce Willis for the slyest crossover in movie history, he finally teed up that sequel. The sequel everybody realised they still wanted. Everybody, that is, except M Night Shyamalan, as this odd, stilted capper to a stealth trilogy ultimately reveals to us.

It begins where you might expect it to end, with a showdown, man to man, movie to movie. A grizzled, silvery Willis is back as David Dunn, still protecting the streets of Philadelphia. Now he's matched against the multiple personalities of *Split*'s Kevin Wendell Crumb, still bringing terror to teenage girls. This first act leans into the spirit of *Unbreakable*, framing Dunn as a hooded angel of salvation, an almost supernatural force of pure heroism. It's the most satisfying part of a film that consistently sidesteps your assumptions.

With Dunn and Crumb captured by the cops, Shyamalan starts to make a sequel that's wholly on his terms. The story relocates to a psychiatric hospital that also houses Samuel L Jackson as a twitchy, silent Elijah Price, faking a near-catatonic state as he advances his plans.

The trio are in the care of Dr Ellie Staple (Sarah Paulson), a specialist in people who believe they're superheroes. The name Staple is an arch but amusing touch – staples hold comics together but this one picks them apart, even if you never buy the idea the film's protagonists are deluded. Other comic book allusions land with a thud, didactic rather than clever.



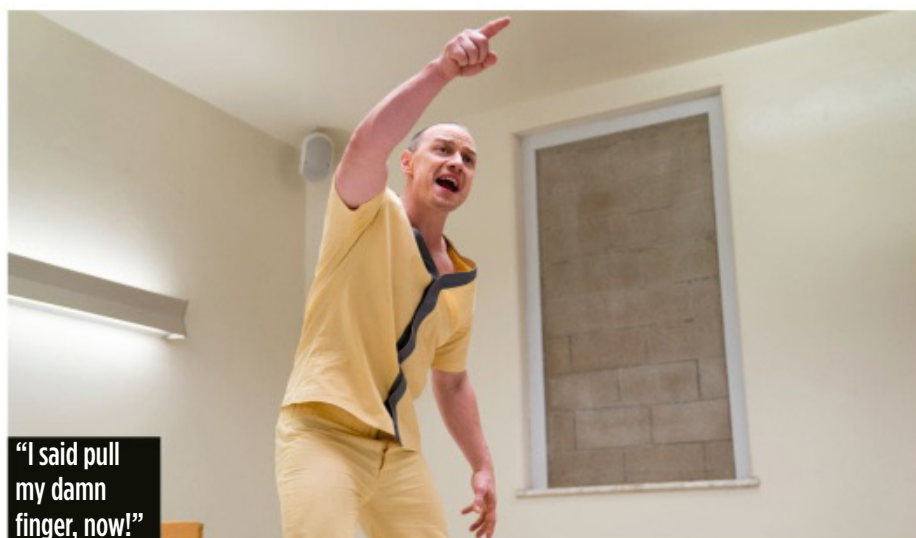
The AA meeting had him on the edge of his seat.

It's here that *Glass* becomes a grind. Shyamalan boxes his toys away in this claustrophobic location, creating a talky, inert chamber piece where characters trade chunks of exposition. It's also at this point that Willis appears to check out of proceedings. He's a muted presence at the best of times, but this is a ghost of a performance in a shell of a character.

Willis isn't entirely to blame for this, though. There's absolutely nothing here for him to grasp, no new colours, no progression. No reason for a sequel. It's soon

“*Glass* is a talky, inert chamber piece”

obvious that Shyamalan has zero interest in his old hero, playing favourites instead with Kevin Wendell Crumb, whose parade of personalities allows James McAvoy another entertaining showcase, albeit at the expense of David Dunn.

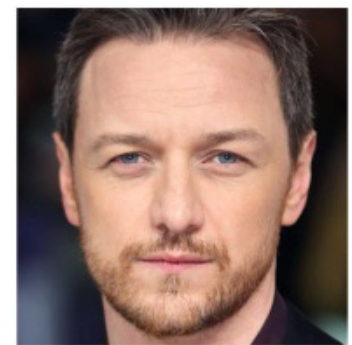


“I said pull my damn finger, now!”



JAMES MCAVOY

The Horde in *Glass*



Was it a challenge to bring all of Kevin's personalities to the screen?

→ Yeah, a daunting challenge, just trying to wrangle that much versatility out of yourself, so that people don't start to just all be the same. They have to exist, but they can't all exist in your comfort zone as a performer.

How important is the relationship with Casey?

→ The relationship with Casey offers Kevin, the Collective and the Horde all an opportunity to sort of... if not redeem themselves, then to find a new way to look at it all. He represents the broken. She represents these people that the Beast and the Horde are fighting to represent and avenge, and maybe to – I don't know – inherit the world for?

What does Night bring as a director?

→ He has a very composed and a very quiet approach to directing. That's not always something you see in superhero movies. He's way more 3D in terms of looking at the people he's depicting. He's not just primary colours. He's very light and dark and many different shades. In a genre where you don't usually get that it becomes even more exciting. **Jordan Farley**

Everything climaxes in a drab parking lot. Until now *Glass* has teased an epic battle at the tallest building in the city. That proves to be epic trolling instead, a shameless pricking of modern blockbuster expectations. Given that Shyamalan financed the film himself he's allowed to skimp on the spectacle – but he skimps on the soul, too, with a nihilistic pay-off that even manages to rather spoil *Unbreakable*. Now that's a superpower.

➔ **Extras** M Night Shyamalan introduces an alternate opening, and also provides optional intros

for no less than a dozen deleted scenes (which represent only a fraction of the material that was chopped from an original cut that was three-and-a-half hours, he confesses). Adding up to about 13 minutes, these are brief and for the most part inessential, but you feel the loss of two in particular: a conspiratorial moment in Raven Hill Memorial between Elijah and his mother, and a haunting interlude between Dr Staple and a deeply creepy patient. Shyamalan is good value here, delivering some genuinely interesting insights into his fastidious creative process.

The rest of the extras are bite-size featurettes, with contributions from cast and crew (though Bruce Willis is noticeably absent), profiling the main characters and covering everything from stunts to storyboards, soundtrack to visual effects. The most satisfying of these is "A Conversation With James McAvoy And M Night Shyamalan" (five minutes), where star and director interview one another. Shame it wasn't longer.

Nick Setchfield

i The cover of the *Whisper Man* comic seen at one point is by Alex Ross, the artist known for *Marvels* and *Kingdom Come*.

THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART

Everything is ordinary

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 3 JUNE**

2019 | U | Blu-ray (4K/3D/standard)/
DVD/download

▶ Director Mike Mitchell

▶ Cast Chris Pratt, Elizabeth Banks,
Will Arnett, Tiffany Haddish, Stephanie
Beatriz

➔ **Alongside some killer gags** and knowing self-awareness, the biggest weapon in *The Lego Movie*'s locker was surprise. What looked, on paper, like a cynical big-screen toy ad turned out to be a funny, inventive breath of fresh air. It was also built around a final-act twist that transforms the way you watch *The Lego Movie 2*.

Because once you know that Bricksburg – now the more overtly sci-fi Apocalypseburg – is the plaything of an actual real-world family, every minifig action is viewed in the context of the kid “controlling” them. They’re less characters in their own right than pawns in a grander plan.

There’s also a more scattershot approach to storytelling that’s about as coherent as a bucket of bricks tipped over the floor. And while *The Lego Movie 2* is frequently very funny, there’s an over-reliance on referencing what came before, a sense that the filmmakers want you to know just how clever they are. So “Catchy

Song” (they’re not lying) feels like an unashamed attempt to out-earworm “Everything Is Awesome”, new action hero Rex Dangervest’s connections with voice star Chris Pratt are hugely overplayed, and the “rules” of the world seem constantly in flux. Still, if one good thing comes out of *The Second Part*, its post-apocalyptic stylings prove that *Mad Max* Lego is a really good idea.

➔ **Extras** Seeing as one of the key building blocks of the Lego franchise is the theme of creativity, it’s fitting that the “Everything Is Awesome Sing-Along” viewing mode is a rare example of a film company fully exploiting Blu-ray’s potential. As well as on-screen song lyrics, there are numerous themed pop-ups, including trivia questions, a count of the number of Lego pieces used in each new creation, and a guide to all the cameos – particularly handy if you were wondering if that really was Velma from *Scooby Doo*.

Elsewhere things are more conventional, with commentary by the director, writers, and animation director; 12 minutes of deleted scenes and outtakes (rather closer to completion than is the norm on animated movies); and the usual promotional material. The “Super Cool” music video brings together the unlikely pairing of Beck and Robyn; “Emmet’s Holiday Party” is a three-minute short that feels like the writers bashed it out in two; and “They Come In Pieces: Assembling The Lego Movie 2” (nine minutes) is a fluffy Making Of that can’t live up to the majesty of its title. Buy the DVD and you just get “They Come In Pieces”.

Richard Edwards

i Rex Dangervest names his Velociraptor army after ‘80s action heroes like Ripley (*Aliens*) and Connor (*The Terminator*).



IN THE AFTERMATH

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1988 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Carl Colpaert

▶ Cast Tony Markes, Rainbow Dolan,
Kenneth McCabe, Kurtiss J Tews

➔ **Ten years before *Ghost In The Shell***, director Mamoru Oshii made a peculiar animated film called *Angel's Egg*. Bought by a US company who clocked its surreal charms, a lunatic decision was made to film extra live-action sequences in an attempt to make it more appealing to a wider audience. The result is this fascinatingly strange hybrid.

In the animated strand, Angel (a young, er, angel) travels to a post-apocalyptic Earth carrying a giant egg. In the filmed sections, Frank (Tony Markes) stumbles through a post-nuclear wasteland searching for water.

The animation is stylish and evocative and, although clearly filmed on the cheap, the live action sequences have an eerie charm as the survivors explore the desolate Kaiser Steelworks (later featured prominently in *Terminator 2*). But while it’s intriguing and atmospheric, any deeper meaning is muddled by its incoherent narrative.

➔ **Extras** There are presumably rights issues preventing *Angel's Egg* from being included here, but its absence is felt. “Path To Aftermath” (11 minutes) is an interview with producer Tom Dugan, recalling its genesis. Lead actor Tony Markes shares his memories in “Apocalypse Then” (14 minutes). Finally, “Before The Aftermath: The Influence Of *Angel's Egg*” (19 minutes) is a deep dive into the animation that started it all. Plus: stills; poster galleries. **Will Salmon**



They love
spying on the
neighbours.



Archery in the dark is never a good idea.

NOVEMBER

Look at what the Kratt dragged in

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2017 | 15 | Blu-ray & DVD (dual format)

▶ Director **Rainer Sarnet**

▶ Cast **Rea Lest, Jõrgen Liik, Arvo**

Kukumägi, Heino Kalm

➔ **Prepare to acquire a new** favourite mythological beast: the Kratt. Made from household objects like irons or scythes as part of a pact with the Devil, this magical creature from Estonian folklore gathers treasure on behalf of its creator.

It's just one of many memorable aspects of this fairy tale, which recalls the work of Ingmar Bergman, and is as cruel as anything the Brothers Grimm collected. The black and white cinematography is stunning, as ghostly all-white figures parade through a misty forest, dust motes dance in the air, or the camera

zooms in on the bark of a tree. The lived-in faces of the (largely non-professional) supporting cast belong in a medieval woodcut. And an earthy, ribald vein of humour prompts guffaws via absurdist sights such as a Kratt helicoptering off with a stolen cow, and villagers putting their trousers on their heads to escape the plague.

The story – a love triangle between wolfgirl Liina (Rea Lest, luminous), fellow peasant Hans, and a sleepwalking German Baroness – is pretty slight. But biting into this piquant gothic confection – a dark chocolate with a suspiciously salty red filling – remains a delight.

➔ **Extras** Trailer; a booklet with a single essay. **Ian Berriman**

i The film's visual style was heavily influenced by Johannes Pääsuke's 19th century photographs of the Estonian poor.



LEVEL 16

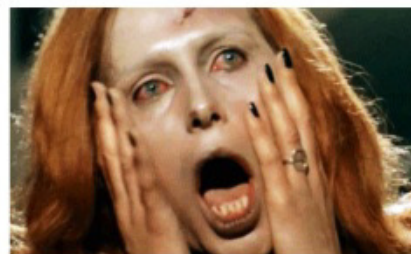
★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MAY**

2018 | 15 | Download

➔ **A feminist high-concept** chiller from Canadian director Danishka Esterhazy, *Level 16* sees a group of girls hothoused in a mysterious school which teaches them how to be feminine, compliant and agreeable. A mystery with an on-the-nose message, this is a clever low-budget curio with lofty ambitions. Chilly set design and a great reveal are rewarding, but a focus on concept over character keeps the audience at arm's length. Intellectually impressive but emotionally lacking.

➔ **Extras** None. **Rosie Fletcher**



THE DEVIL'S NIGHTMARE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1971 | 18 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT In this wildly camp slice of Belgian-Italian gothic/sexploitation, a bus-load of lost tourists spend the night at a spooky castle (on their arrival a gargoyle falls off a tower, the doors open and close on their own, and a butler declares, "Do not be alarmed, the castle is full of traps.") Soon they're being offed one-by-one by Erika Blanc's succubus in a manner vaguely related to the seven deadly sins. It's nonsense, but fairly entertaining.

➔ **Extras** None. **Will Salmon**



THE SIREN

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2019 | 15 | DVD

➔ **Originally titled *The Rusalka***, this siren tale draws on Slavic folklore. A grieving man searches for the monster that killed his husband. Meanwhile, a mute man falls in love with the beautiful, troubled young woman who seems to inhabit the lake. Guess the connection. All the actors are good, there's some lovely cinematography and the first half has a strong ambience. But as the film crawls along, it does start to feel like you're just watching three Urban Outfitters models standing around in a lake.

➔ **Extras** None. **Will Salmon**



IRON SKY: THE COMING RACE

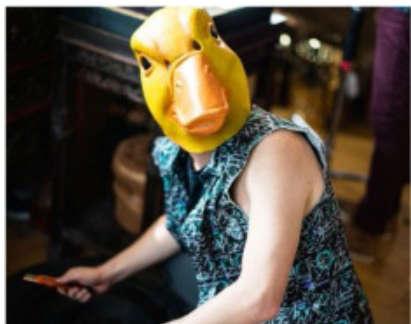
★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2019 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD

➔ **No one could accuse this** sequel to the 2012 tale of invading Moon Nazis of not delivering on its lunatic premise. A reptilian Hitler riding a dinosaur? You got it. That doesn't, of course, mean that it's any good... 20 years on, Obi (Lara Rossi) leads a group to the centre of the Earth and encounters a race of reptilian shapeshifters. The production values are pretty good, but its attempts at satire fall flat, and many characters are irritating.

➔ **Extras** None. **Will Salmon**



MEGA TIME SQUAD

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2018 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD

▶ Director **Tim van Dammen**

▶ Cast **Anton Tennet, Jonny Brugh, Morgan Albrecht, Milo Cawthorne**

➔ **Sharing the loose, slackerish** vibe of *What We Do In The Shadows* – along with star Jonny Brugh – this lo-fi Kiwi comedy mixes crime movie, Chinese mythology and the paradoxes of time travel.

Anton Tennet is John, one of a gang of dimbulb crims bringing something less than terror to suburban New Zealand. Staging a heist at a local Chinese antiques shop, he steals an ancient bracelet that grants the power to pop back in time – and accumulates cross-temporal duplicates of himself in the process. How much multiple gormlessness can reality take? Watch and see.

Tennet is winning as the clueless but eternally upbeat small-town chancer – a bungled bank job nets only 35 bucks but hey, that's enough for some beers – and some seamless, unshowy effects sell the illusion of him sharing screentime with himself. Tim van Dammen's direction is equally understated, allowing a characterful cast to make the most of the film's parade of low-life.

The plotting could've had more fun with the fourth dimension and yes, it's a film with more ideas than money – but that's the right way round, at least.

➔ **Extras** Audio commentary by writer/director Tim van Dammen, and a seven-minute interview with him conducted for Frightfest's YouTube channel. Plus: trailers; image gallery. **Nick Setchfield**



She really hated her new fringe.

MAQUIA

An age-old story

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MAY**

2018 | 15 | Blu-ray & DVD (dual format)/Blu-ray/DVD

▶ Director **Mari Okada**

▶ Cast **Manaka Iwami, Miyu Irino, Ai Kayano, Yoshimasa Hosoya**

➔ **You've heard the phrase** "weaving a tale"? This fairytale anime (unwieldy full title *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*) takes the idea literally in a story about a secluded clan whose members live – and stay young – for centuries, and spend their days weaving Hibiol, a special cloth that chronicles the passing of time. Quite why they've committed themselves to this monumentally dull task and what the cloth is actually for is never made clear, but don't worry about that. Just think of it as a metaphor for the waft and weft of life.

Then the village is attacked by a city state whose dragon-like

Renato are dying; they think marrying their Prince to a near-immortal weaver will produce a magical child who'll distract the masses from the dragon shortage. During the attack, timid Maquia escapes into the world beyond, where she adopts a child left to die after another attack.

We follow their lives in what feels like an extended "story so far" recap, with her son growing old as she stays young, against a backdrop of a *Games Of Thrones*-esque empire in decline. Then, in the last 15 minutes, it slows down for a triple-hanky finale and a lengthy flashback montage that feels like watching the film all over again.

There are moments when *Maquia* is powerful, both visually and emotionally. But the choppy narrative, underdeveloped ideas and sketchy secondary characters leave it feeling like an anime series that's been hastily re-edited for theatrical release.

➔ **Extras** Just trailers on the disc, but the Collector's Edition comes with an A3 poster and 88-page Making Of book. **Dave Golder**

i The buildings and bridges in Maquia's clan's village were designed to look as if they'd been carved from solid rock.

“It has a triple-hanky finale”



GONKS GO BEAT

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MAY**

1965 | U | Blu-ray/DVD

▶ Director **Robert Hartford-Davis**

▶ Cast **Kenneth Connor, Terry Scott, Frank Thornton, Arthur Mullard**

➔ **The title sounds like pure** '60s whimsy – so right for a kitsch curio once damned as “the worst British film ever made” – but that's actually a laser-sighted marketing exercise in just three words.

Directed by cash-in king Robert Hartford-Davis, *Gonks Go Beat* chases two fads with equal cynicism: the gormless ragdoll toys that swept the world long before Furbies and Beanie Babies, and the kind of finger-snapping, bikini-shaking pop musical that kept Cliff Richard on the big screen. Sounds like a deeply unlikely mix, doesn't it? Hold on, let's pour some low-budget science fiction over that...

Carry On manchild Kenneth Connor is bumbling galactic troubleshooter Wilco Roger, assigned to bring peace to planet Earth. In this strange future the world is split between rival islands: Beatland, home to guitar-toting hep-cats – “If you're with it you're in!” – and Balladisle, where chaste teens swoon among plastic palms to syrupy pop picks. The Romeo and Juliet tale that unfolds is the thinnest of connective tissue for musical numbers that showcase hit parade stars and also-rans alike. Crate-digging everyone from Lulu to Ray Lewis and the Trekkers, this awful but endearing shambles makes a fascinating jukebox, at least.

➔ **Extras** Trailer, image gallery, and a PDF of the original press book. **Nick Setchfield**

Raven's Wand

by Steve Hutton

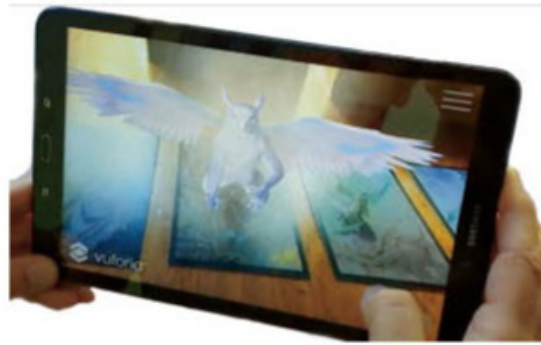
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The Edge was determined to stop Bono singing.

SNOWPIERCER

The age of the train



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2013 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director Bong Joon-ho

▶ Cast Chris Evans, Jamie Bell, Tilda Swinton, Song Kang Ho

NETFLIX We don't usually review six-year-old movies when they hit Netflix, but we'll make an exception for this overlooked gem, which never made UK cinemas, still has no British DVD, and was barely noticed when it debuted on Amazon last Autumn.

Adapted from a French graphic novel, it's set 17 years after a scheme to fix global warming instead created a new ice age, and follows the few survivors as they circle on a preposterously elaborate train – luxurious for the elite front-enders, miserable for the oppressed tail-enders. When Curtis (Chris Evans) leads an

uprising, an odyssey towards the engine begins.

Evans – think Cap, but in a beanie – is excellent, but Tilda Swinton steals the show as the train's deputy despot; all *On The Buses* dentistry and Yorkshire vowels, she's a Nick Park plasticine figure come to life.

There's some stunning action, like a slo-mo axe fight, but the production design impresses most. As Curtis and co proceed from squalor to splendour, through hothouses, schools and saunas, you'd think Luc Besson and Wes Anderson had teamed up to blow the \$40 million budget on sets. Neither the train's topography or the final twist make any sense, but you'll be too busy feasting your eyes to care. **Ian Berriman**

i The look of Tilda Swinton's character was based on a photograph of American ornithologist Roxie Collier Laybourne.

ALAMY (1)

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON: THE HIDDEN WORLD

How To End Your Trilogy



EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 10 JUNE**

(download 27 May)

2019 | PG | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download/VOD

▶ Director Dean DeBlois

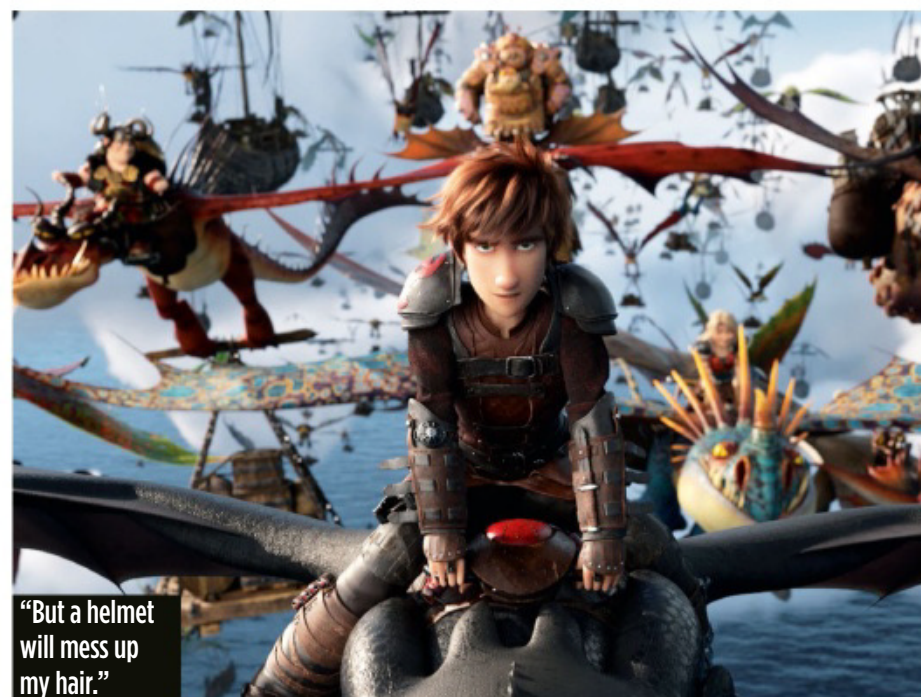
▶ Cast Jay Baruchel, America Ferrera, F Murray Abraham, Cate Blanchett

➔ **While plenty of movie sagas** keep their characters in a state of arrested development, *How To Train Your Dragon* has never been afraid of evolution. This is a world where geeky outsider Hiccup can become a Viking chief, and events

have consequences, whether it's the loss of a limb or a loved one.

The new spanners in the works for this third instalment are ruthless dragon hunter Grimmel (played with sinister relish by F Murray Abraham) and a love interest for Hiccup's scaly bestie, Toothless. And because of the saga's past form, you're never quite sure if this trilogy closer is going to have a happy ending...

The character beats are first rate but the story's too lightweight. You may have to hold back the tears during the emotional last act,



"But a helmet will mess up my hair."

but there's too much aerobic dragon flirting before then.

➔ **Extras** The 12 featurettes mostly clock in at four minutes or less, so they're not overflowing with facts. The bits about designing the dragons and their world are more engaging than fluffier docs about the story and voicing the roles, while there are fun ideas like a dragon riff on Top Trumps.

Luckily, anyone after a thorough education on the making of the movie will love the commentary with the director, a producer and head of character animation. You also get five deleted scenes, an alternative opening and two bonus DreamWorks shorts. **Richard Edwards**

i Toothless's look was based on a mix of a black panther and a salamander. His flying style was inspired by a sparrow.



BATMAN VS TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 3 JUNE**

(download out now)

2019 | 12 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Director **Jake Castorena**

▶ Cast **Troy Baker, Eric Bauza, Darren Criss, Baron Vaughn**

➔ **“Gotham is bonkers,”** says Michelangelo. He’s right. So bonkers that shoving the Ninja Turtles and their enemies into Gotham City isn’t as odd as you might think. Sure, the Turtles have a bunch of bad guys who look like giant human animals, but Batman has Man-Bat, and a million more weirdos.

As Alfred dryly observes, “Monsters, certainly Gotham is in more need of those.” Actually, it is – this is DC’s best animated movie for years. It’s packed with fan service, including deep cut references. “We’re not aliens, we’re Turtles,” Donatello says, referring to a 2012 rumour that Michael Bay was rebooting the Turtles as aliens.

Shredder already feels like a Batman villain and pairing him with Ra’s Al Ghul makes perfect sense, while the Foot Clan and League Of Shadows inspire excellent fight choreography. If we have a criticism, it’s a minor one: in what should have been an all-ages experience, this is surprisingly brutal. Still, the aim was clearly to be as faithful as possible, and both comics have violent origins.

➔ **Extras** Two behind-the-scenes featurettes (totalling 29 minutes), one on the crossover of the franchises and one on the fight sequences, plus a trailer for the next DC animated film, *Batman: Hush*. **Sam Ashurst**

(ROUND UP)



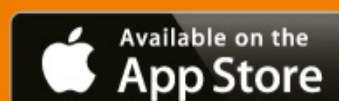
Based on a documentary about a man who dealt with trauma by building a miniature World War II village, **WELCOME TO MARWEN** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) sees Steve Carell’s character projecting friends and neighbours onto dolls, imagining they’re his protectors from Nazi soldiers. We said: “Robert Zemeckis finds moments of inspiration, and Carell is affecting in places, but the feeling generated is mostly of a missed effort.” A government scientist wakes up in a cell in **WHITE CHAMBER** (out now, VOD), where she’s interrogated using heat and cold, an electrified floor, and acid. Featuring one set and an anarchist political angle, it’s a decent low-budget British sci-fi; think *Cube* meets *V For Vendetta*. **THE DEADLY BEES** (out now, Blu-ray) is an obscure effort from horror anthology specialists Amicus. Despite the talent involved – direction by respected cameraman Freddie Francis; script by *Psycho*’s Robert Bloch – this tale of a pop singer visiting an island to recuperate and discovering someone’s breeding killer bees is a pretty clichéd affair, one where you can see the twist a mile off. Finally, 1971’s **THE BLOOD ON SATAN’S CLAW** (Blu-ray, 27 May) sees 17th century young folk turning to rape and murder after a skull’s unearthed in a field. We said: “One of the best British horrors of the ’70s. It deserves to be as well known as *The Wicker Man*.” Bonuses included on this latest limited edition include new interviews with the writer and director, composer, sound mixer, and actor Simon Williams.

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FRANKISSSTEIN

Making monsters?



► **RELEASED 23 MAY**

344 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author **Jeanette Winterson**

► Publisher **Jonathan Cape**

Just over 200 years ago, while staying in a Swiss villa, an 18-year-old woman came up with an idea which created a genre. Since then, *Frankenstein* has been re-realised and reimagined many times, creating more classics of book and screen in the process, but the most interesting versions have always been ones which re-examined the core questions of the novel. What makes us human? Can that ever be replicated in our creations – and how would we react to them if it could?

This latest take on the tale, by *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* author Jeanette Winterson, tackles just those questions, and is based around one key point: just how central are our physical forms to our sense of self? And with sexbots appearing at tech expos, AI in nearly every home and cryonics facilities continuing to intrigue, how close are we, really, to a world in which that physical form is truly unnecessary?

Subtitled *Frankissstein: A Love*

Story, it's set across two time periods. In the first, Mary Shelley travels with her husband Percy, stepsister Claire, the infamous Lord Byron and his doctor Polidori. Death is all around her – by the time of that trip to Lake Geneva she had already lost one child, while in England the Peterloo massacre is soon to erupt, against the background of another clash between the competing roles of humans and machines. So Mary daydreams of a world in which fragile bodies do not doom the human mind and soul.

Meanwhile in our near future, the 19th century characters are echoed in the 21st – we meet Ry Shelley, Victor Stein, Ron Lord, evangelical Claire and journalist Polly D, playing out those same questions in a world that may finally be capable of answering them. Medical doctor Ry is transgender, bringing an

“Can what makes us human be replicated?”

understanding of the disconnects that can already exist between mind and physical form. Victor is a professor who's obsessed with human evolution past the point of biology, lecturing on how our current enhancements – glasses, hip replacements, prosthetics – will eventually lead to a world in which “intelligence will no longer be dependent on a body”. But what exactly is he planning to achieve?

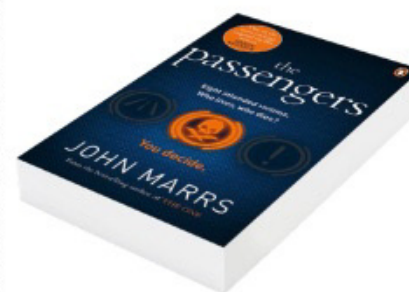
This is a surprisingly funny novel, from Mary's catty digs at her stepsister to Polly's misadventures with “intelligent” vibrators. And characters that could be clichéd are instead well-rounded, with unexpected layers. Ron Lord is an unreconstructed man who's found massive success with a sexbot company – many of his statements on sex and gender are truly cringeworthy – but he knows that a major foundation of his business is not sex, but loneliness.

The original *Frankenstein* is explicitly informed by Shelley's own emotional relationships with birth, death and parenting, and this retelling is again a very feminine take on the tale. In the past, Mary muses that men would not find death so heroic if they too carried a life inside them for nine months then saw it perish, while in the future, it seems to be men who are continually fascinated by the potential of bots and AI, while women worry about the biases of the real world being replicated across the virtual.

The biggest criticism of *Frankissstein* is that it feels more a novel of ideas than one of plot; while we see some resolution in the life progression of Mary, the 21st century section feels like it simply runs out of steam, with a dramatic climax that doesn't quite take. Wherever Stein is trying to take the world, we're certainly not there just yet. But with a surprising amount of the novel based on real, current science and technology, it won't be too long before we're tackling these questions for real.

Rhian Drinkwater

Byron's daughter, Ada Lovelace, was one of the inventors of computer programming in her work with Charles Babbage.



THE PASSENGERS



► **RELEASED 30 MAY**

(ebook out now)

406 pages | Paperback/ebook

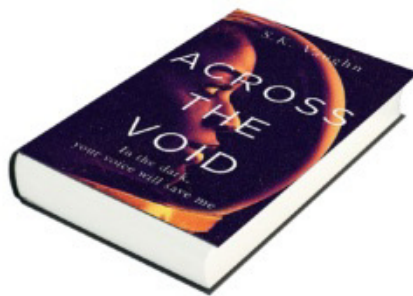
► Author **John Marrs**

► Publisher **Del Rey**

Crammed with page-turning hooks, *The Passengers* is literary heroin, an irresistible combination of high-concept scenario, technofear, conspiracy thriller, social satire and lurid personal tales. None of it particularly subtle, but all of it hugely entertaining.

In the near future, the UK has become the first country in the world to operate a completely driverless car road network, with the government ignoring fears about how the vehicles' AIs have been programmed to react in the event of potential collisions. That is until a terrorist called the Hacker hacks into eight of the allegedly unhackable cars, sealing in their passengers and setting them on a collision course. He then demands that the members of a corrupt government committee set-up to oversee driverless AI choose which passenger survives. With each specially chosen passenger having a dark secret that the Hacker is only too ready to reveal and exploit, the tragedy soon becomes a global social media circus, and the sickest ever reality show.

Full of twists, vividly drawn characters you'll love or love to loathe, and pacy action, the book occasionally suffers from using didactic dialogue to make its political points, while the final revelations are near ludicrously contrived. But this is a story about the journey, not the destination, and it's a hell of a ride. **Dave Golder**



ACROSS THE VOID

★★★★★

► RELEASED 6 JUNE

480 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author SK Vaughn

► Publisher Sphere

➔ *Across The Void* has been written under a pseudonym by an established author who also has movie writer-director credits – a sneaky touch, as now you’re wondering who it is, too – and it’s being touted as a cross-between *The Martian* and *Gone Girl*.

Naturally, you’ll end up comparing it to both... but alas, it’s not fit to lick their book covers. It’s actually a crunching collision of two writing styles: one good, one bad.

The good comes from the book’s *The Martian*-style techie side, as a lone astronaut, May, battles to survive after a mysterious calamity afflicts her ship. Accompanied only by its AI, she bounces from one desperate life-threatening problem to another, and it’s often gripping stuff.

On the *Gone Girl* side, however, there are countless flashbacks, almost all of them completely unnecessary, to May’s life before she went on the mission and what destroyed her marriage to one of the men behind it. Because she now suffers from amnesia, this unspools at the same time for her as it does for us – but when we finally get the answers, they’re shrug-worthy.

If *Across The Void* had just been a pure-science survival mission rather than an uneasy hybrid of that and an unconvincing romance, it might have worked. As it stands, though, this book is much better off lost in space.

Jayne Nelson



SALT SLOW

Beauty In The Beast



★★★★★

► RELEASED 30 MAY

214 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Julia Armfield

► Publisher Pan Macmillan

➔ Sometimes a collection of short stories comes along that keeps you up through the night, pulling you from one page to the next. Julia Armfield’s debut collection is just such a book, its bite-sized pieces of fantasia telling tales of strange women and what lurks beneath their skin.

Armfield won the White Review Short Story Prize for “The Great Awake”, a ghostly piece about an insomniac city where sleep takes on physical form and separates itself from its hosts. But that’s far from the only treasure here. “Mantis” tells the story of a girl whose skin shreds and whose muscles spasm, but who still yearns to be pretty. Then there’s “Stop Your Women’s Ears With Wax”, about a girl band whose music

drives young women into a frenzy; and “Formerly Feral”, an inverted retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood* in which a she-wolf understands the violence of being a teenage girl more than a mother ever could.

These stories all loop together like a spiked daisy chain. Armfield understands so well the dangers of being a young woman, and she plucks at these shared experiences until they blossom frightfully on the page. In her hands, love curdles into rage, ex-boyfriends become effigies, and desire is a dark spell that can be used to incite violence and self-destruction. Like Carmen Maria Machado’s recent collection *Her Body And Other Parties* or Poppy Z Brite with *Wormwood*, Armfield weaves dark fairytales from women’s hidden lives.

She tells her stories in a kind of dreamy realism, magic brushing along their edges. There’s a distinct echo of Angela Carter in the way a young wolf is dressed up in a pinafore, or the way a man slowly begins turning to stone. But Armfield still has a delicate, enchanted voice all of her own. It’s a beautiful collection, one that’s never afraid to see the savagery behind every kiss. **Kimberley Ballard**

i Armfield is currently writing her debut novel, about a strange facility for women who can’t be trusted with their bodies.

“Armfield has a delicate, enchanted voice”



SNAKESKINS

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

416 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Tim Major

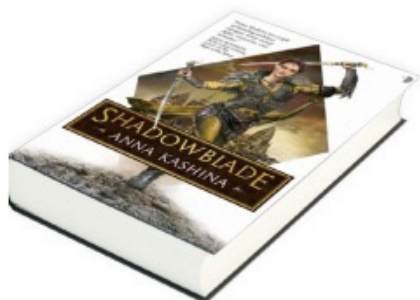
► Publisher Titan Books

➔ Within the first few pages of *Snakeskins* a man rejuvenates by shedding his old body, which lives independently and self-aware for a few moments before disintegrating. It’s a horrific image, and a thought-provoking concept. You assume the book is going to explore the morality of a race that survives by creating beings with an in-built death sentence.

Sadly not. *Snakeskins* is 95% plot plot plot. In an alternate, ultra-isolationist, almost contemporary Great Britain, a group of ever-healthy übermensch “Charmers” are feared and loathed by the hoi polloi, but have somehow managed to take over the government. Of course there’s a conspiracy going on, and of course a group of disparate people (a journalist, a rebellious young Charmer, a civil servant,) stumble upon it.

As a straightforward thriller it’s adequate, if a little cosy. The pace is sprightly and the characters engaging, but the book suffers from a few too many convenient coincidences and a rushed climax. More problematic is that it exists in a world that doesn’t make sense on a socio-political level, populated by people who seem to have taken centuries to ask the right questions. The poor old discarded “skins” deserve some psychological exploration, but ultimately they’re just as much sacrifices to the plot mechanics as they are to the story’s totalitarian regime.

Dave Golder



SHADOWBLADE

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

432 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Anna Kashina

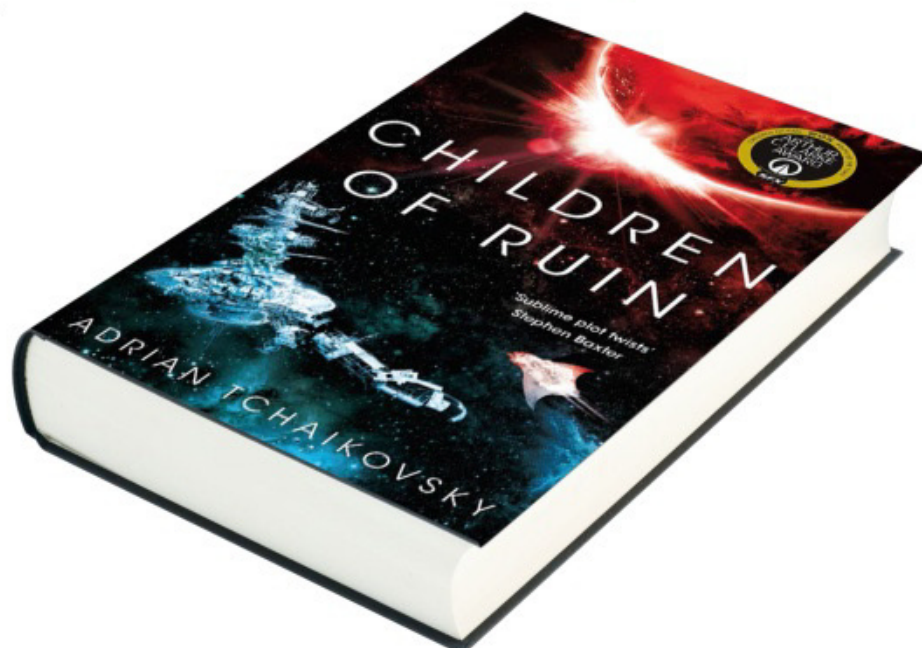
► Publisher Angry Robot

➤ As a romance, *Shadowblade* isn't particularly romantic, and as a fantasy it isn't fantastic either. The setting, all deserts and schools of scholars and assassins and vicious emperors and queens, is vaguely *Arabian Nights*, which does at least set it apart from the Eurocentric majority of Western fantasy, but nothing that happens in the plot is unexpected, and you'll spot the villain of the piece early on.

It's tempting to blame that on the romance aspect of the novel, as romance seems to be a genre where certain things are expected (not least that two people can meet, instantly experience a lust so powerful it translates into an understanding of the other person's personality, then still feel exactly the same *three years later*), but there are only two sex scenes in the novel, so it doesn't exactly deliver on that front either. The romantic leads, a newly-trained "Shadowblade" impersonating a long-lost princess, and another of her profession, are as dull as dishwater; Machiavellian scholars Dal Gassan and Dal Mehtab are more interesting, but their actions and motivations are barely explored apart from where they touch on the heroine's life.

It's a shame, as there's some interesting world building being done here, but everything suffocates under a blanket of by-the-numbers passion.

Miriam McDonald



CHILDREN OF RUIN

Off to the land of Nod

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

576 | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Authors Adrian Tchaikovsky

► Publisher Macmillan

➤ For all that science fiction and fantasy are closely related fields, the odd eyebrow was raised by Adrian Tchaikovsky taking the 2016 Clarke Award for *Children Of Time*. Tchaikovsky was, after all, a fantasy writer having an away-day from his regular gig, better known as the author of fantasy sequence *Shadows Of The Apt*.

Which perhaps goes to show how genre categories can limit the imaginations even of genre readers because, as *Children Of Ruin* proves, should there be any doubt, Tchaikovsky is no hard SF dilettante. Rather, he's a nerdy hard SF mechanic, a man who, to judge by the *Children* books, is fascinated by the way the genre enables him to tinker with ideas about how different intelligent species see the universe.

He also seems to be strongly influenced by the collision of

grandeur and weirdness that characterised so much space opera around the turn of the millennium. Thus his set-up, which involves a time-split narrative where events from deep history play into the present, capricious spacefaring octopi, and the dangers posed by first contact with a parasitic lifeform, combines big ambition with skin-crawling details.

Yet this is far from a crude horror-in-space novel. Rather, as we see Avrana Kern, an AI whose processing power is partly provided by ants, and her human/arachnoid cohorts arrive in a solar system where humankind once hoped to establish a colony on a terraformed world known as Nod (a failure we also follow), it's clear Tchaikovsky's primary interest is in how different kinds of creatures might communicate. A key point being that biology shapes how we see the universe, which in turn shapes how we share our thoughts about the universe – and work together rather than falling into conflict.

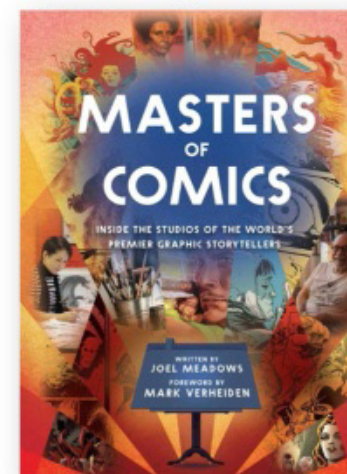
That he does this while also conjuring up a sweeping narrative that recalls Peter F Hamilton or Alastair Reynolds at their best should be recommendation enough. Terrific. **Jonathan Wright**

i Science philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Other Minds*, which deals with cephalopod intelligence, was a major influence.

“Conjures up a sweeping narrative”

BULLET TIME

A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



MASTERS OF COMICS

► **RELEASED 4 JUNE**

184 pages | Paperback

► Author Joel Meadows

► Publisher Insight Editions

● Comics journalist Meadows visits the studios of 21 of the world's best comics artists.

● It's an impressive selection of talent, and it's good to see a book devoted to covering the artistic side of comics.

● Each chapter follows a Q&A format, with Meadows asking questions about process, covers, their working days and so on.

● The book gives a decent insight into the working lives of comics pros.

● The photographs of the studios themselves, perhaps unsurprisingly, aren't that revelatory; these are mostly functional working spaces.





THE PLAGUE STONES

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

496 pages | Paperback/ebook

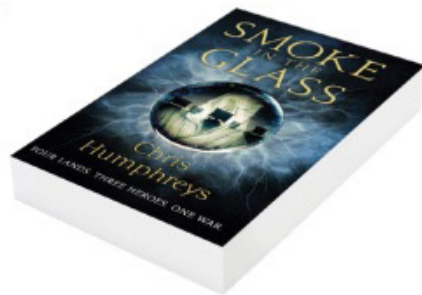
► Author **James Brogden**

► Publisher **Titan Books**

► **Starting your supernatural horror novel with the dedication “To Grenfell” is a pretty bold move, and one that could, in less dexterous hands, have felt cheap. Fortunately James Brogden’s social folk horror, which mixes issues of modern bureaucracy and corruption with a mirroring tale of 14th century plague victims, treads that line just carefully enough to work.**

Trish, Peter and their son Toby are a family living in a dodgy estate when a mysterious opportunity arises for them to move to the beautiful village of Haleswell. The catch? Trish must act as custodian of a sacred stone that wards off an ancient evil. With shades of Shirley Jackson and a black vein of humour, *The Plague Stones* deftly intertwines the family’s present-day dilemma with the story of young Hester, the daughter of a landowner who tries to save her village when it’s struck down with disease.

Brogden writes with empathy for all his characters, including the semi-treacherous head of the nefarious village trust and even the manifestation of poor Hester, riddled with sores and flanked by her army of malevolent rodents. It’s crying out for a screen adaptation, but Brogden isn’t the new Jordan Peele. Instead, what shines through is a pacey horror and a very British fable for our times. **Rosie Fletcher**



SMOKE IN THE GLASS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

334 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author **Chris Humphreys**

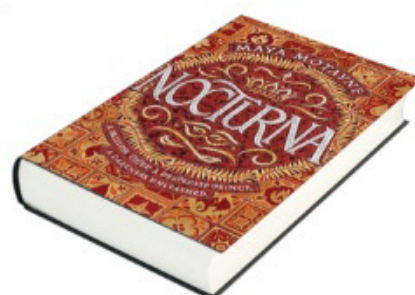
► Publisher **Gollancz**

► **People who don’t read many fantasy novels think the genre doesn’t change much, but this one proves how far it’s come. Elements of it are badly dated in the wrong way.**

The most obvious is in its quartet of civilisations – the world is split into four, with the different areas now coming into contact with each other for the first time as one seeks to conquer the rest – which are just too analogous to real-world historical ones. Going from the Precolumbian-like Ometepe to the Greco-Roman Mediterranean Corinthium to the Vikingsque Midgarth is like switching areas in a theme park, and while the main characters are well-drawn, the supporting ones feel dropped in to play a role, and perhaps to take part in a parade before everything closes for the night.

Also, attractive women have breasts. It’s important to know this. That presumably is why we’re told about them with monotonous regularity. Female characters aren’t quite at the point of “breasting boobily to the stairs and titting downwards”, but they’re not far off at times. Unattractive women appear not to have breasts, as theirs are never mentioned.

You do get to know and like the main characters, and it’s to Chris Humphreys’s credit that they’re a diverse bunch in terms of race and gender. It’s just a shame their surroundings are so regressive. **Miriam McDonald**



NOCTURNA

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author **Maya Motayne**

► Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

► **First-time author Maya Motayne, who has Dominican heritage, says she wrote this Latinx-inspired novel “after years of reading stories where the princes and princesses were always British, blond and blue-eyed”. An excellent decision, in response to a valid concern. Except that despite its brown-skinned characters, post-colonial setting and a few Spanish terms, *Nocturna* still feels like a thousand other magical fantasies. Motayne’s welcome cultural explorations could have been pushed much further... although, depressingly, perhaps that wasn’t seen as “commercial” enough? We can but wonder.**

What we do have is a decent adventure starring that ages-old combo of a prince and a thief who end up on a quest together. Prince Alfehr is looking for answers after the apparent death of his brother, while face-changing thief Finn is roped into robbing his palace’s vault. A few chapters later and *whoops*, an ancient evil has been unleashed! Cue a race to save the world.

There are a few fabulous one-liners (perhaps a little too 21st century in tone, if we’re quibbling), some colourful ideas about magic (literally, as it’s colour-coded) and a decently nasty bad guy, but *Nocturna* isn’t half as fresh as it clearly wanted to be. Hopefully the passionate Motayne has more detailed imaginings on the way.

Jayne Nelson

REISSUES

Pick of the paperbacks this month: Peng Shepherd’s debut **THE BOOK OF M** (★★★★★, 13 June, HarperVoyager). This post-apocalyptic tale



is set in a future where people are losing their shadows, and with them their memories.

Violent anarchy ensues, of course. We said: “Shepherd writes with an economical but evocative sense of place and a deft hand when it comes to sketching her protagonists’ emotions. There are a few too many redshirts and contrivances, but the splendidly ambivalent pay-off is well worth the ride.” In Angela Chadwick’s **XX** (★★★★★, 6 June, Dialogue Books), scientists develop a



method to create new life from two egg cells... but every resulting “XX” baby is a girl. Naturally, not

everyone is happy with this state of affairs, with politicians railing against fatherless families and newspapers running anti-XX pieces. We said: “A sensitive book with a beautiful feel for human potential, filled with real, breathing characters muddling their way through new, yet universal, situations.” Finally, Mats Strandberg’s pungent, pulpy shocker **BLOOD CRUISE** (★★★★★, 13 June, Jo Fletcher Books) sees chaos breaking out on



a cruise ship en route to Finland, after a vampiric child starts a wave of infection. We said: “The sort of old-school horror novel that got furtively passed around the playground. Some of the characters are well-sketched... but you can’t help thinking that it could’ve sailed into port in two-thirds the time.”



"I like what you've done with the spare bedroom."



Sheen's lightsaber is a bit crap.



Neil Gaiman goes like the clappers.



A costume design for Tennant's Crowley.

THE NICE AND ACCURATE GOOD OMENS TV COMPANION

Series bible

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author **Matt Whyman**

► Publisher **Headline**

► **There's no denying that this** lavish Making Of spreads the word as decreed on high, with party line toed throughout. Even so, you couldn't realistically hope for a better companion to the *Good Omens* TV series.

While occasionally repetitive – there's only so many times you can read how Neil Gaiman scripted the show after a last request from his co-author Terry Pratchett; or about the epic scale

of the lavish BBC/Amazon production – this is superior stuff. As well as wrangling contributions from all the surviving key players (among them Gaiman himself, the stars, director Douglas Mackinnon, and Pratchett's long-time assistant and "representative in this world" Rob Wilkins), author Matt Whyman editorialises a little more than you'd expect from a book like this.

“It's littered with amazing concept art”

His contributions add far more personality to the on-set reporting than is the norm in official tie-ins.

And it looks heavenly. With chapters working their way through the main characters, as well as the key locations (how many other projects need to create both the quintessential English village *and* the Garden of Eden?) the book's littered with amazing concept art, behind-the-scenes photos and stills. It even has pages devoted to Michael Sheen and David Tennant dancing! A hell of a book. **Richard Edwards**

i Rob Wilkins now owns the motorbikes ridden by Horsepersons of the Apocalypse Famine, Death, Pollution and War.

ALSO OUT

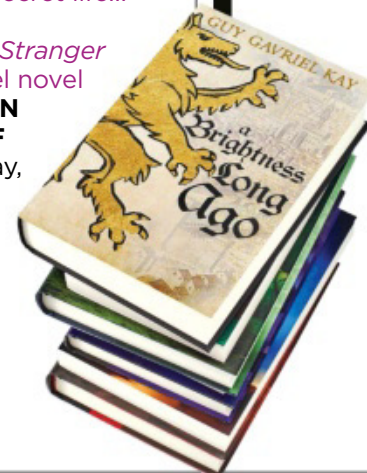
That Adrian Tchaikovsky is prolific, isn't he? *Children Of Ruin* (see page 102)

isn't his only newbie: there's also **WALKING TO ALDEBARAN** (30 May, Solaris). This novella follows an astronaut lost in the tunnels of a weird alien artefact. Political corruption and a serial killer's secrets feature in **THE FORGOTTEN GIRL** (out now, Titan). Rio Youers's dark mystery centres on a busker who learns his girlfriend has the ability to selectively erase someone's memories... Social media and encryption inspired Stewart Hotston's

TANGLE'S GAME (out now, Abaddon). This tech thriller follows a woman on the run in a world where an unhackable blockchain links everyone and everything. Neatly timed to coincide with the new film, **X-MEN: THE DARK PHOENIX SAGA** (out now, Titan) is the latest prose version of a classic comics storyline.

Guy Gavriel Kay's **A BRIGHTNESS LONG AGO** (out now, Hodder & Stoughton) is a standalone prequel to *Children Of Earth And Sky*. Set in an alternative Renaissance Italy, it follows a host of characters, including an assassin, a healer and two mercenary commanders. We rather dug *The Wren Hunt*, Mary Watson's YA tale of warring magical tribes in a small Irish town, calling it "heartfelt and deeply spiritual". In follow-up **THE WICKERLIGHT** (30 May, Bloomsbury), a girl gets entangled in an ancient feud after delving into her dead sister's secret life... Finally, Adam Christopher's *Stranger Things* prequel novel

DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN (28 May, Century) reveals what happened when Chief Hopper went undercover among New York's street gangs in '77.



Guy Gavriel Kay, bestselling author of the groundbreaking novels *Under Heaven*, *River of Stars* and *Children of Earth and Sky* returns with yet another breathtaking epic.

One of Goodreads'
Most Anticipated
SFF Books of 2019



'The greatest
living author
of epic fantasy'
Brandon Sanderson

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

HODDERSCAPE
NEVER AFRAID TO BE OUT OF THIS WORLD

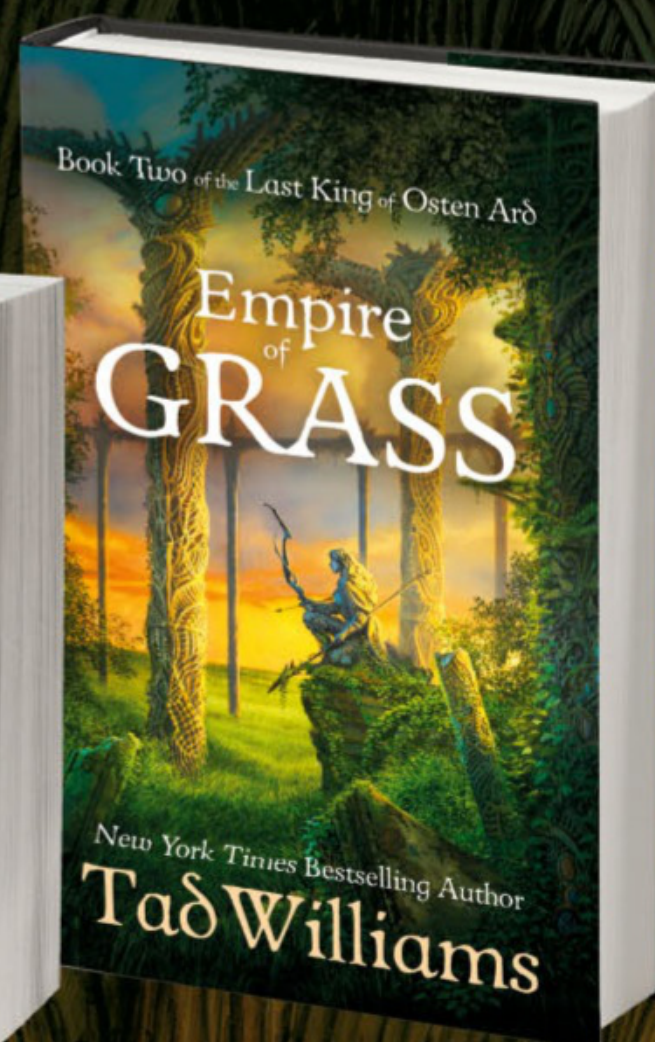
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'One of my favourite
fantasy series'
George R. R. Martin

'Ground-breaking . . . paved the way for
so much modern fantasy, including mine'
Patrick Rothfuss

Read the second book
of The Last King of
Osten Ard, from the
world-famous fantasy
novelist, Tad Williams.

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H
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STOUGHTON

SNAKESK

Reporter Gerry Chafik tries to impress upon her tabloid editor the threads of conspiracy behind the Charmers' mysterious rejuvenating powers.

ZEMMA PUSHED A GLASS TOWARDS Gerry, leant back and steepled her fingers. Her manicured nails tapped together.

"So."

Gerry took a breath. "So. Thanks for agreeing to this meeting, Zemma."

"It's always a pleasure. You're the wheels that keep this newspaper running. All of you are, I mean."

"I need to know where I stand," she said.

Zemma arched an eyebrow. Her eyes flicked down to Gerry's chair.

"The takeover," Gerry continued, speaking more quickly. "The changes. It's all been far more profound than we were led to believe – more than just a new owner and a new tabloid format. I need to know... Is *Folk* still *Folk*, beneath the flashy new red-top banner? I need to know that we're still about news. It doesn't matter that it's given out for free at tube stations. It doesn't matter that it's rammed full of adverts. People still want news when they read a newspaper. Right?"

Zemma sipped her drink. "That's a lot of questions, Geraldine. Perhaps you should pick just one."

"I'll pick a different one, then. Where do I fit in?"

"I'd say... current affairs."

"What does that even mean?" Gerry paused, then shook her head. "No. That's not my question, after all. My question is, why haven't my last five stories been printed anywhere in the newspaper? And the one before, the only one you've actually published since the Cormorant buyout, why did you bury it just before the sport?"

Zemma offered a sickening smile. "We don't care."

"You –" Gerry blinked. "You don't care? You, meaning Zemma Finch, or you, meaning *Folk*?"

"Neither. Both. I mean the readers, Geraldine. And I still class myself as one, an avid one, regardless of my exalted position. We

readers simply don't care about the stories you've written. Our readers," she said in a slow voice, as though speaking to a child, "want short, sharp stories. For their dreary commute, you see. This isn't an issue of the takeover, or the new format. It's a matter of entertainment, Geraldine. Gerry."

"It's not supposed to be entertainment."

"It isn't? So it's supposed to be about the dry facts, is that right? That's all well and good, but put it this way: if there's a factual article in the woods and there's nobody there to read it..."

Gerry stared at her. She wished she had the nerve to hold her tongue, to force Zemma to complete the idiotic analogy. She lasted only a few seconds. "I've been doing important work. These are stories that people would read, if only you actually published them. More to the point, they're stories that people need to know about." Gerry gave an exasperated sigh. "We're talking about Snakeskins, Zemma. Charmers and Snakeskins. The most important and least understood development of the last two hundred years, eclipsing the Industrial Revolution, world peace, the founding of Great British Prosperity. It would be a crime not to investigate further, to try and comprehend. People want that."

"Oh, people want it, all right."

"I have a new report," Gerry said, aware that she was gabbling. "I wanted to bring it to you personally. A first-hand account by a Charmer. He talks about the psychological discomfort involved in shedding. Wait, that's not all. He's outraged by the levels of secrecy in Charmer society. He has family members in the Party, and if I could follow up on those leads... I swear, Zemma, people don't know a fraction of

The Author



→ Tim Major's love of speculative fiction is the product of a childhood diet of *Doctor Who* episodes and an early encounter with *Triffids*. He has authored *You Don't Belong Here*, *Blighters* and *Carus & Mitch*, the YA novel *Machineries Of Mercy*, short story collection *And The House Lights Dim*, and a non-fiction book about the silent film *Les Vampires*. His shorts have appeared in numerous anthologies, and he's co-editor of the British Fantasy Society's journal.

the ways in which Charmers wield power. We could serialise this thing for weeks."

Zemma opened a desk drawer and produced a purple cardboard folder. "It all sounds terribly conspiratorial. My assessment would be that this source of yours is overstating his hand in order to be noticed. As for the report you *have* written... it's simply the angle that you're getting wrong. This is 2020, not the Victorian era. People don't want dry 'accounts' of sheddings. I assume this source of yours is pretty average, is that right? Just a 'bloke', like you and me and our readers?"

Gerry's lips tightened. She nodded.

"Now *these* are what people want." Zemma opened the folder and spread a handful of documents across the gleaming surface of the desk.

They were photos. The images were almost entirely black, with only faint sources of light that illuminated the handful of figures. In the first photos the people were all in one corner, as if the photographer had been far

away, or as if he or she hadn't known quite where to point the camera. The people were arranged in a semicircle.

Despite herself, Gerry bent closer. In each successive picture, the figures grew in size. The photographer must have been sneaking towards them, hidden in the darkness.

All but one of the figures had their backs to the camera. Gerry realised that she recognised the woman facing the camera, standing before a fire in an ornate iron brazier. Her build was slighter than the people around her. Her shoulder-length hair shone white.

"That's Rebecca Verne," Gerry said.

Zemma nodded.

"And she's a –"

INS

AN SF THRILLER EXAMINING THE REPERCUSSIONS OF REJUVENATION AND CLONING ON INDIVIDUALS' SENSE OF IDENTITY AND ON WIDER SOCIETY.

by Tim Major

Another nod.

"She was fifty-two last week," Zemma said. "You'd never know it, would you?"

"Seriously? Rebecca Verne's a Charmer?" Gerry already felt foolish for caring. "How has she kept it secret all this time?"

"You know what that industry's like. Ever since she began as a Pinewood starlet – at a more advanced age than you might expect – she's been surrounded by an entourage, protected from the real world. Who's going to let on?"

Throughout Rebecca Verne's acting career, and despite her glamorous red carpet appearances at premieres and awards ceremonies, she had specialised in down-to-earth roles. She was loved for her empathy and her ability to hold a mirror to people in all strata of society. And all this time, she had been a Charmer. The British public would be outraged. But any sense of unfairness would be overwhelmed by fascination.

"It gets better," Zemma said. She pushed a few photos aside to reveal the ones at the bottom of the pile.

Now the photographer had reached a position close enough to be able to frame Rebecca Verne perfectly. She wore a long, loose, grey gown studded with pinpricks of bright white – probably sequins, but the effect was that it looked as though her own body were the source of illumination, rather than the fire. Her face was that of somebody half her age. There were no creases or any hint of looseness to the skin.

In the next photo Rebecca was looking up at the sky. Her mouth was open, perhaps in speech.

"Why did she do it outside?" Gerry wondered aloud.

"Basic hygiene, darling," Zemma replied. "All that dust."

Gerry glanced at the next picture. Now Rebecca's body really was glowing, but with a greenish light rather than the white of her sequins or the yellow of the fire. The photographer kept her framed within the left-hand side of the image. The right-hand side was empty and black.

Zemma pulled another photo from the pile. Gerry couldn't stop herself from gasping. Rebecca Verne stood beside Rebecca Verne. The originator still faced the sky. The newcomer looked to her right, at the first woman.

And, of course, the Snakeskin Rebecca was naked. Either she was unashamed, or she hadn't yet the presence of mind to care, but her arms hung at her sides, displaying a taut, pale body. She was beautiful. They were both beautiful.

In the next photo, one of the entourage had already placed a cape around the Snakeskin's shoulders. The cape still revealed a wide V of the Snakeskin's flesh, as though it were a designer gown.

"This is the one," Zemma said, pointing at the next image.

The man with the cloak had retreated again. Now the original Rebecca Verne, the Charmer, had turned to face the newcomer. They regarded each other levelly. Though one wore a shimmering gown and the other a plain black cape, in every other respect they were identical. Even their blonde hair was styled in exactly the same manner. Gerry

peered at the two faces. If there was a difference, it was in their expressions. The Charmer's nose tilted upwards very slightly, making her look a touch imperious. The Skin held her head fractionally further back, as if mid-flinch. It was only a faint hint, but she appeared afraid.

"Tomorrow's front page," Zemma said.

"Not that one, then?" Gerry pointed at the photo of the naked Rebecca.

"It's glorious, isn't it? But no. We couldn't afford the court battle. Never fear, the picture won't be wasted. Miss Verne will pay for that one herself."

Gerry pushed the front-page image to one side. In the next photo, the framing of the two Rebeccas had gone askew. By the next one, they were barely visible at the corner of the image. The photographer must have turned and run.

No matter how illicitly the photos had been gained, they were undeniably fascinating. Gerry hated herself for what she was about to say. "Zemma, if you want I could –"

Zemma shook her head. "We have all the details we need. The story writes itself, or at least a junior assistant will write it, which amounts to the same thing. Frankly, the photos speak for themselves."

Gerry scolded herself for the distraction. "So we're back to my first question, then. Where do I fit in, Zemma?"

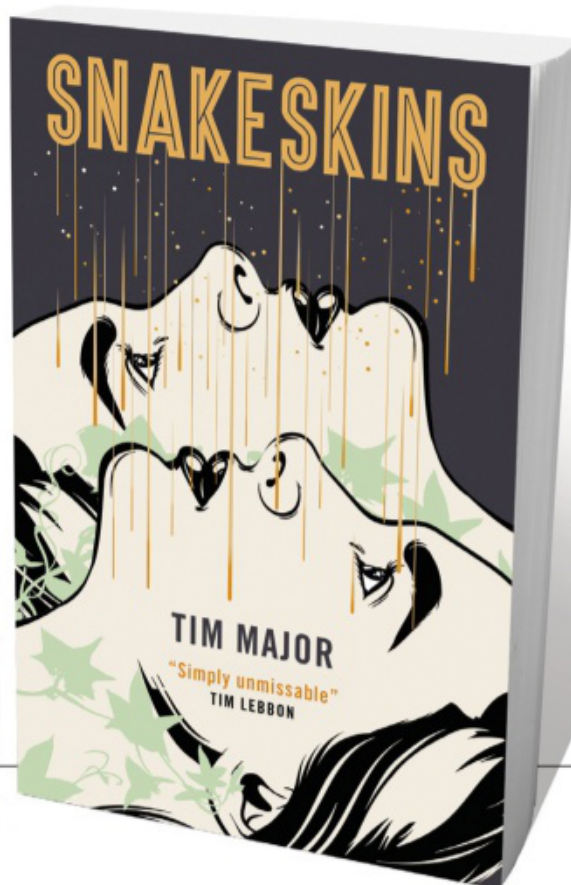
The editor gazed up, her chair swaying slightly.

"I'm not going to beg," Gerry said, though she felt on the cusp of doing exactly that.

Zemma turned to look through the floor-to-ceiling window into the main office. Gerry suddenly realised what had been alien about the newsroom when she had passed through it earlier – the lack of phones ringing or any voices in discussion.

"I think I can answer the question myself," Gerry said.

Resisting a last look at the photos on Zemma's desk, she turned and left.



To find out what happens next, pick up a copy of *Snakeskins*, out now from Titan Books. TITANBOOKS.COM

WAR OF THE REALMS

Seen it all be Thor



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer **Jason Aaron**

► Artist **Russell Dauterman**

ISSUES 1-3 Thanks to his legendary source material, few Marvel heroes are quite as well-suited to world-shattering confrontations as Thor, and over the years the son of Odin has starred in a whole selection of lurid and apocalyptic showdowns. Now Marvel have made him the centrepiece of their latest splashy crossover, but while the results are as loud and extravagant as you'd expect, *War Of The Realms* is also a showcase for the worst excesses of event comics storytelling.

Part of the problem is that this is actually the climax to a years-long saga that's been running in the

main Thor title since 2014, and which for new readers will feel like stumbling by accident into the last 20 minutes of a Hollywood blockbuster.

Admittedly, the set-up for this six-issue miniseries is fairly simple: Malekith the Dark Elf has been amassing forces of evil and conquering the separate realms of reality, with only Midgard – our own world – left to be defeated. Now he's launched an all-out attack on Earth, and as the combined heroes of the Marvel Universe unite to fight back a seemingly endless tide of mythical terrors, there's a traditional mix of quips, fights and explosions, but thanks to the haphazard storytelling there's little sense of impact to what transpires.

Instead, Jason Aaron's script for these first three issues plays like

a weirdly abrupt compilation of big action-packed moments without the connective tissue that would make the reader care about what's happening.

There's no shortage of large-scale set-pieces here, but almost all of these end up as empty noise and bluster, with an excess of characters yelling dramatically at each other. It doesn't help that Aaron's take on Malekith is barely more interesting than the character's weak MCU appearance in *Thor: The Dark World*, while none of his partners in supervillainy make much of an impression.

Artist Russell Dauterman delivers slick but serviceable art

“Even the major character deaths fail to hit home”

that's only truly memorable for some imaginative use of sound effects, and even the major (and no doubt reversible) character deaths fail to hit home.

The story does eventually start acquiring some proper shape in issue three, as a quest to rescue Thor from imprisonment begins, but it will take a lot for the latter half of this saga to compensate for such a tone-deaf opening.

There may well be some genuinely fun material happening elsewhere in the multitude of related spin-offs and crossover issues, but the core *War Of The Realms* miniseries is so far feeling like a flat cover version of a story we've seen too many times already.

Saxon Bullock

i Russell Dauterman previously worked as a costume design illustrator on movies like *Captain America: The First Avenger*.



MAJOR X



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer **Rob Liefeld**

► Artists **Rob Liefeld, Brent Peeples, Whilce Portacio, Scott Hanna**

ISSUES 1-3 While *Major X* is

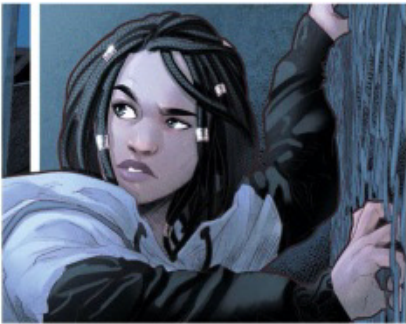
Rob Liefeld's first new Marvel character for three decades, the motorcycle-helmeted mutant is little more than a variation on one of his previous, more memorable contributions, namely the X-Men's time-travelling cyborg Cable.

Three issues in, this six-partner is essentially a flashback to Liefeld's heyday at the House of Ideas, as Major X fetches up in 1991 alongside an even shaggier Beast, M'Koy, where they face off against not only the original X-Force but also a sinister alternate Merc With a Mouth, Deadpool.

Liefeld pencilled the first issue himself, and its opening scene of our hero with his boot on the face of a prone Cable is superbly choreographed. With the sequences of Major X driving between dimensions on his Motherbike bringing to mind the New Gods's Orion, there's a real Kirby-esque verve and dynamism to his layouts. So it's a shame when Liefeld gives way to the solid Brent Peeples in #2 and the more ornate Whilce Portacio in #3, leading to an inconsistency that isn't helped by the muddled plot, as Major X is distracted by some vengeful but forgettable Atlanteans.

Not as good as Liefeld's recent *Deadpool* graphic novel *Bad Blood*, *Major X* doesn't quite mark the spot, but it's still an unashamedly enjoyable nostalgia fest. **Stephen Jewell**





NAOMI

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Comics**

► Writers **Brian Michael Bendis, David F Walker**

► Artist **Jamal Campbell**

ISSUES 1-4 Since arriving at DC, acclaimed writer Brian Michael Bendis has been tackling established characters and reviving old favourites at a rate of knots, but his latest release marks his first new ongoing series for the company, as well as being a distinctive new take on superhero storytelling.

Co-written with David F Walker, *Naomi* follows the titular character, an African-American teenager whose quiet smalltown life is up-ended when a brief visit from Superman leads to her discovering that this wasn't the first superhero-related occurrence in her town.

The tale of how this mysterious long-ago event connects with the adopted Naomi's origins is what drives these first four issues. Bendis and Walker go for a dialogue-driven approach, interspersing occasional eye-catching set-pieces with a slow-burning but satisfying pace, all backed up by Jamal Campbell's expressive, nuanced art.

The mix of weird superhero sci-fi and down-to-earth family drama makes for an engaging read, and while Bendis and Walker are keeping plenty of mystery back, there's already lots of intriguing potential in this opening arc. *Naomi's* emphasis on a seemingly ordinary girl trying to find her place in a strange universe proves the man who created Miles Morales hasn't lost his touch at introducing memorable new characters. **Saxon Bullock**

He had a part-time gig building dry-stone walls.



PETER CANNON: THUNDERBOLT

The Book Of Moore Man



★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Dynamite Entertainment**

► Writer **Kieron Gillen**

► Artist **Caspar Wijngaard**

ISSUES 1-4 If you find DC's *Watchmen* sequel *Doomsday Clock* morally dubious then this anarchic and affectionate postmodern reinvention of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's landmark 1985 series could be the antidote.

Ostensibly a revival of the old Charlton character who provided the template for *Watchmen's* malevolent Ozymandias, it sees Kieron Gillen highlighting all sides of his multi-faceted character, as Peter Cannon is pitted against an evil alternate-universe version of himself. It boasts many sly nods to Moore and Gibbons's opus: for example, the first issue begins – just as *Watchmen* finishes – with a fake alien invasion. And when one of Cannon's cohorts meets a sticky end, they leave a Rorschach-style imprint behind.

It's mostly built around a nine-panel grid, with Gillen and Caspar Wijngaard playing fast and loose with the conventions of the medium, as Cannon and his allies literally pass across the page as they travel between dimensions. While Wijngaard's art is mostly dynamic and sleek, he adopts a looser style for #4's brilliantly understated black and white sequences. Closely modelled on Eddie Campbell's *Alec* comics of the '90s, Wijngaard's sketchy art is further enhanced by the use of old-fashioned Letratone, and by Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou's meticulous hand lettering.

Gillen's essentially doing for superheroes here what he's already done for music in *Phonogram* and gaming in *Die*, and his scintillating take on the genre will leave you gasping for more. Hopefully this five-parter won't be the last we see of Peter Cannon. **Stephen Jewell**

i Peter Cannon: Thunderbolt was created in 1966 by Peter Moreci, a New York cop who wrote and drew comics part-time.



SHARKEY THE BOUNTY HUNTER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Image Comics**

► Writer **Mark Millar**

► Artist **Simone Bianchi**

ISSUES 1-3 With a seemingly endless stream of new comics being announced, keeping up with the prolific output of Mark Millar can be exhausting – but if his latest title is any indication, maybe he needs to slow down his rapid-fire pace.

Sharkey The Bounty Hunter sees Millar back in sci-fi mode, with an abrasive comedic tone that's closest to his early 2000 AD work, and a plot that feels more like a lost, below-par Vin Diesel vehicle from the early 2000s, in which a bad-ass has to look after an annoying kid.

It's the story of Sharkey, a purple-skinned alien bounty hunter who gets unwillingly saddled with a youngster called Extra-Billy while hunting a dangerous intergalactic criminal. The clichéd odd couple pairing is not without its fun moments, but Millar's occasional heartfelt side is barely present in these opening three issues, and any deft imaginative touches are bludgeoned away by the smarmy humour and rather grating characters.

The one true draw is Simone Bianchi's gorgeous artwork, which conjures up lush sci-fi craziness on every page. It's just a pity these visuals can't compensate for a story that's too dumb for its own good, or the way that Millar's slick, attention-grabbing style falls flat without a strong central idea to hold it all together.

Saxon Bullock

DAYS GONE

Freak Scene

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 4 Pro

► Also on PlayStation 4

► Publisher Sony

VIDEOGAME **There's a moment** when, unarmed and out of fuel, we feel genuinely vulnerable in this vast open world. It's not because of the bandits roaming the woods – we've taken down our share – it's the shriek from the dark and the knowledge that somewhere close by 300 "Freaks" (28 *Days Later*-like zombies) can smell our blood.

Sony's latest juggernaut release comes hot on the heels of *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Spider-Man*, and in many ways it poaches ideas and controls from both of them (as well as old Sony staples such as *Uncharted* and *The Last Of Us*). There's a comfortable feel to the game that could be interpreted as generic, but only in the same way

as every Marvel movie feels a little bit like the last.

Where *Days Gone* shows it can sit with the Sony pack is with its world – a vast post-apocalyptic stretch of Oregon littered with the shells of cars and trucks, abandoned farms and moments of shocking beauty. Hidden in this mix of dense forests, lake shores and snowy mountain passes are those Freaks. Hordes of over 300 roam the landscape hunting and feeding. Shoot a deer and half a dozen will scurry on screen to chow down; trip a car alarm scavenging for scrap to craft ammo

“Few games this year deliver like *Days Gone*”

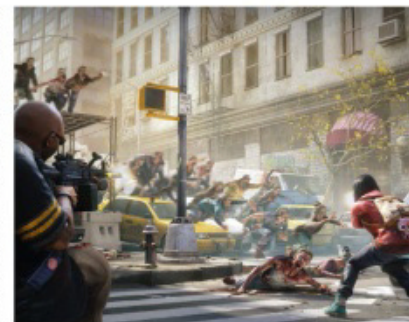
and bike parts and you'll have hundreds swarming around you.

Escape is by foot (bad) or bike (great), and surviving in these wilds is about keeping your hog healthy. Upgrades can be bought at trading camps once you've earned their trust – that's open-world for side quests.

There are many systems at play in *Days Gone* and they all feed into a fun experience that supports an engaging 40-hour narrative arc, one which sees protagonist Deacon St John searching for his missing wife. Does he find her? Does she want to be found? Did the dev really crowbar a *The Birds* reference in here? It's a story of many questions, and the answers are thankfully fulfilling.

While the game has had issues at launch, with stuttering frame rates on standard PS4s and numerous bugs, patches have resolved most problems. If you can overlook the cookie-cutter approach there are few games this year that deliver quite like *Days Gone*. **Ian Dean**

i The same developer also created PS1 hit *Syphon Filter*, and hidden in *Days Gone* is that series' trademark taser gun.



WORLD WAR Z

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PC

► Also on Xbox One, PlayStation 4

► Publisher Focus Home Interactive

VIDEOGAME **Regardless of how** you feel about the Brad Pitt movie it's adapted from, this game perfectly captures the horrors of a pyramid of zombies attempting to overcome anything to feast on your grey matter. Masses upon masses of the ambling, groaning things move at quite a pace, and seeing your entire horizon fill with Zeds, as they're known, is quite the visual spectacle. It's also spectacular fun to mow them down with a full arsenal of weaponry, including a very bloodthirsty chainsaw.

It channels Valve's *Left 4 Dead* as much as it does its movie source material though, leaning heavily into four player co-operative gameplay (online or offline with AI bots) across a storyline that takes you all over the world, from New York to Japan.

Impressive set-pieces, such as trying to ram open a train depot while fighting a swarm of zombies, keep the action flowing, even if the narrative itself isn't exactly deep. This means that replayability may well be limited going forward, and it doesn't help that the competitive mode feels like a multiplayer game from last-generation consoles.

But *World War Z* is all about the zombies – the shuffling masses really are the main appeal here. Coupled with fantastic graphics and brilliant gunplay, they make for a zombie shooter that's worth at least some of your time.

Sam Loveridge



Saturday's Park Run was about to get much tougher.

DOCTOR WHO: THE RUNAWAY

Passion project



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on **Oculus Rift**

► Also on **HTC Vive**

► Publisher **Big Finish**

VR GAME You've woken up in the TARDIS and the Doctor is standing over you – she needs your help. Sounds like every *Who* fan's dream. But how much you enjoy this new virtual reality adventure from studio Passion Pictures will depend on your expectations.

For starters, it's only 13 minutes long. And it's less a *Doctor Who* videogame than an animated mini-episode. Written by Victoria Asare-Archer, it's about a ball of alien energy called Volta, who may explode at any moment. It's also

not *that* interactive. You can't interact with the TARDIS console, for example, or walk around (apparently your leg is broken).

Yet, as *Doctor Who*'s first step into VR, it's promising. The graphics are cartoonish but rich with character, with the Doctor (voiced by Jodie Whittaker) feeling like a friend. And it's a genuine thrill to turn 360° and see the TARDIS around you, to fly it through a debris field, and to hold the sonic screwdriver. These moments make up for the shortcomings – and leave you intrigued by the future of *Doctor Who* VR. **Stephen Kelly**

i Victoria Asare-Archer is said to be writing for *Doctor Who* Series 12. She also worked on upcoming Starz show *The Rook*.



The Doc needs help – she's feeling light-headed...

MORTAL KOMBAT 11

Rush of blood



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on **PlayStation 4**

► Also on **Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, PC**

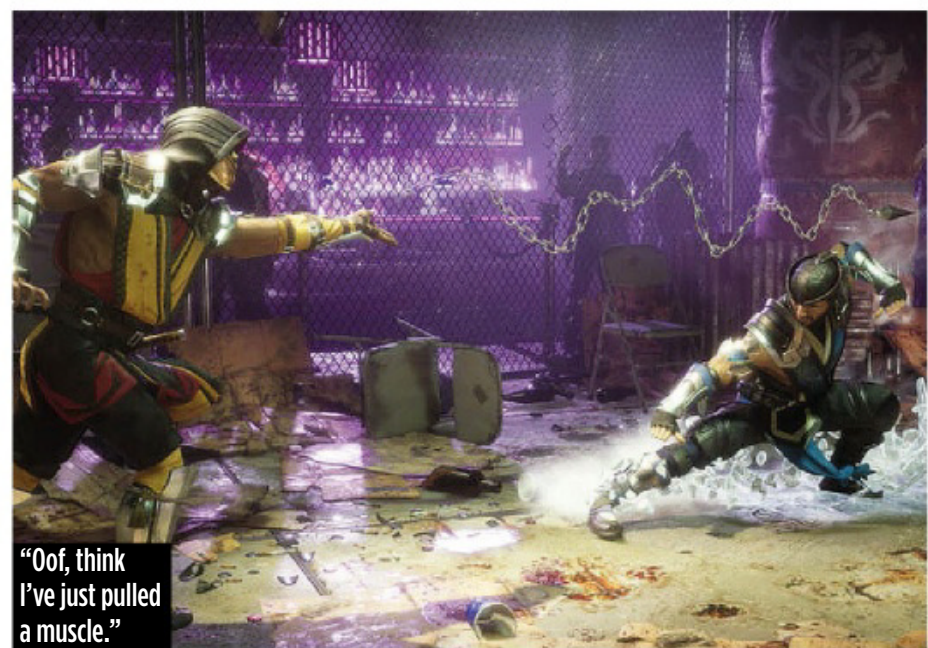
► Publisher **Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment**

VIDEOGAME Whereas most fighting games revel in their intimidating reputations, demanding hours of commitment and practice for players to even learn the basics, *Mortal Kombat 11* throws the doors wide open. With one of the most friendly and comprehensive tutorials we've ever seen in the genre, and a slower-paced battle system that emphasises tactical thinking and adaptability over reflexes and muscle memory, it's one of the most accessible entries the genre has ever seen.

And even if you still find brawling online too scary a

prospect, the game offers a wealth of single-player content, headlined by a best-in-genre cinematic story mode. Telling a fantastically silly tale of time travel, cyborg ninjas and interdimensional invasions, it plays out like the *Avengers: Endgame* of '80s martial arts movies. Its very literal mash-up of the series' past and present – which includes many characters meeting their own younger selves – provides a particular treat for long-standing fans.

“The series' trademark blood and gore is hyper-realistic”



“Oof, think I've just pulled a muscle.”

Thanks to fantastically detailed graphics, its over-the-top set-pieces are genuinely spectacular, and its fan favourites look better than ever. Be warned, though, that all that extra fidelity does make the series' trademark blood and gore hyper-realistic too, sometimes with queasy results.

An awkward progression system aside (does any game *really* need seven different currencies?),

this is the *Mortal Kombat* series at its best yet – tense, strategic and deeply competitive in multiplayer, while engrossing yet irreverent when played solo. All of which makes it all the more wonderful that, for once, it's a fighting game that anyone can enjoy. **Robin Valentine**

i When two players are playing Frost, an intro sees them share an exchange which uses lyrics from *Frozen* song “Let It Go”!

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SAW, LOST



BRANDON ROUTH
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LEGENDS OF TOMORROW



ARTHUR DARVILL
DOCTOR WHO
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HELEN SLATER
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SUPERGIRL



RYAN GAGE
HOBBIT, MUSKETEERS



FINN JONES
IRON FIST, GOT



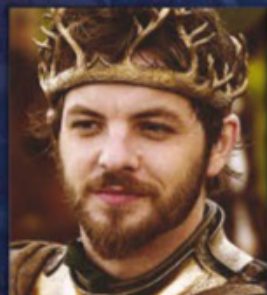
JESSICA HENWICK
IRON FIST, STAR WARS



ADAM BALDWIN
FIREFLY
THE LAST SHIP



CARY-HIROYUKI TAGAWA
MAN IN THE
HIGH CASTLE



GETHIN ANTHONY
GAME OF THRONES
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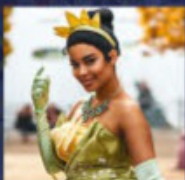


KAROL CRISTINA DA SILVA
STAR WARS



LAURA VANDERVOORT
SUPERGIRL, JIGSAW

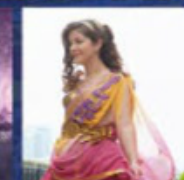
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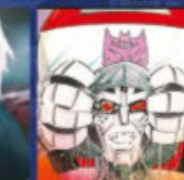
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NEIL GAIMAN

He's been a novelist, comics guru, TV showrunner and more – but how well do you know Neil Gaiman's worlds?

Quizmaster Will Salmon, Contributor

QUESTION 1

What is unusual about The Other Mother's eyes in both the novel and the film adaptation of *Coraline*?

QUESTION 2

Which cult comic series saw Gaiman take over the writing duties after Alan Moore left?

QUESTION 3

Who directed (and co-wrote the screenplay, along with Jane Goldman) of the 2007 film adaptation of *Stardust*?

QUESTION 4 PICTURE QUESTION

Which TV series, for which Gaiman wrote one episode in 1998, is this?

QUESTION 5

Name the issue of *The Sandman* that won a World Fantasy Award in 1991.

QUESTION 6

What was the name of Gaiman's first solo novel, published in 1996?

QUESTION 7

In *American Gods*, Mr Wednesday is, in fact, an aspect of which Norse deity?

QUESTION 8 PICTURE QUESTION

Name the artist who painted this cover for *The Sandman*.

QUESTION 9

In Gaiman's 2011 *Doctor Who* episode "The Doctor's Wife", whose consciousness does Idris become a host for?

QUESTION 10

What is the name of Gaiman's – as yet unreleased – sequel novel to *Neverwhere*?



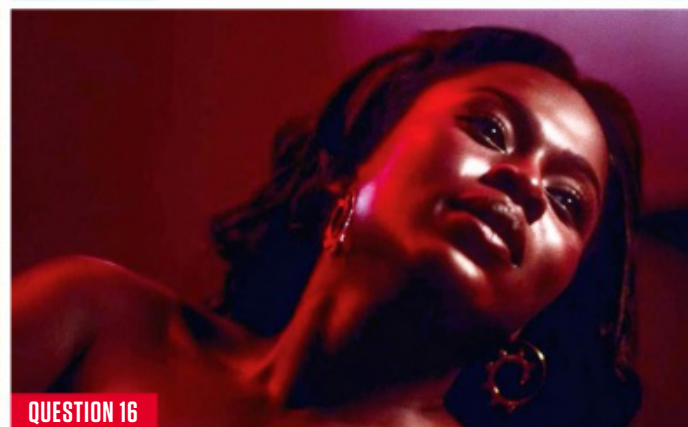
QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11

What real-world disease was short comic *Death Talks About Life* designed to raise awareness of?

QUESTION 12 PICTURE QUESTION

Name the *Sandman* character carrying some books here.

QUESTION 13

Which singer – and friend of Gaiman's – has a song lyric about, "Me and Neil... hangin' out with the dream king"?

QUESTION 14

In *Sandman*, for how many years was Morpheus imprisoned by The Order of the Ancient Mysteries?

QUESTION 15

Who is the boy magician at the heart of comic series *Books Of Magic*?

QUESTION 16 PICTURE QUESTION

What's the name of this actress, one of the stars of the TV adaptation of *American Gods*?

QUESTION 17

Which long-running anthology strand in 2000 AD was a home for Gaiman's first published comics?

QUESTION 18

What was Gaiman's original working title for the book that eventually became *Good Omens*?

QUESTION 19

In the TV version of *Neverwhere*, the Angel Islington was played by which future *Doctor Who*?

QUESTION 20

Including Death and Dream, how many members make up The Endless in *Sandman*?

Answers: 1 They are buttons 2 *Miracleman* 3 Matthew Vaughn 4 *Babylon* 5 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 6 *Neverwhere* 7 Odin 8 Dave McKean 9 The TARDIS 10 *The Seven Sisters* 11 AIDS 12 Lucien 13 *Tori Amos* 14 72 years 15 Tim Hunter 16 Yelide Badaki 17 *Future Shocks* 18 William the Antichrist 19 Peter Capaldi 20 Seven

How did you do?

Which member of The Endless are you?

0-5
Destiny

6-10
Destruction

11-15
Delirium

16-19
Dream

20
Death



DIGBY, THE BIGGEST DOG IN THE WORLD

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

You don't tend to think of Britain as giant creature feature territory, but we've had a crack at it a few times. 1961 saw Big Ben menaced by both a Godzilla-like beast in *Gorgo*, and a giant ape in *Konga*. But Blighty's most charming attempt is this 1973 movie, in which an Old English Sheepdog swells to titanic proportions after eating an experimental growth formula, is sold to a circus, then escapes.

They say familiarity breeds contempt, but I beg to differ when it comes to Digby. When I was a kid, it seemed to be on ITV every bank holiday, and I've got a huge soft spot for it. Based on a 1960 book by Ted Key (who also scripted Disney's *The Cat From Outer Space*), its pedigree is pretty impressive. Screenwriter Michael Pertwee penned Terry-Thomas comedies like *Too Many Crooks*. Director Joseph McGrath helmed promos for Beatles hits such as "Ticket To Ride". And cinematographer Harry Waxman was behind the camera on *Brighton Rock* and *The Wicker Man*. Plus, the cast includes practically every great British character actor of the period: *Barbarella*'s Durand Durand; *Are You Being Served?*'s Mr Peacock; *The Vicar Of Dibley*'s Frank Pickle; that bloke who got



suffocated by a plastic chair in *Doctor Who*... But the chief scene stealer is Spike Milligan as an outrageously accented German shrink, a role which basically requires him to scuttle about in the background and say things like, "Vot is der schnag?"

Digby himself (trained by Barbara Woodhouse) was Fernville Lord Digby, star of the Dulux ads throughout the '70s. There was obviously a product placement clause in his contract, as we see a Dulux ad on TV, and later a carefully positioned pot of paint!

It is a very silly film. It's ridiculous that Jim Dale's bumbling animal psychologist can track Digby better than the army. And the humour's not exactly subtle (someone *literally* slips on a banana skin). But Dale's accident-prone everyman act is as endearing as it was in the *Carry On* films; the process shots are pretty decent; and at the end, when a normal-sized Digby comes lolloping along seconds after apparently being bombed to bits by the RAF, I get a massive lump in my throat. Coming from a cat person, that's high praise. ●

Digby is the only dog that Ian Berriman would ever want to call his own.

Fact Attack!

→ Writer Michael Pertwee was *Doctor Who* star Jon Pertwee's older brother – and the cousin of Bill Pertwee, the warden in *Dad's Army*.

→ Edwin Astley, composer of the theme song, also wrote the themes for *The Saint*, *Danger Man* and *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*.

→ The film's NATO base location – High Canons in Borehamwood – was also in *The Devil Rides Out*, as the house of Satanist Mocata.

→ In reality, the biggest dog in the world was Zeus, a Great Dane who measured 44 inches from the ground to his shoulder.

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